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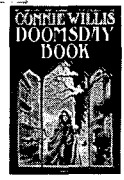

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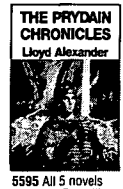

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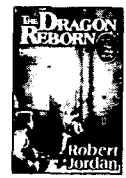

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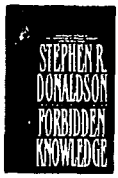

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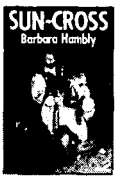

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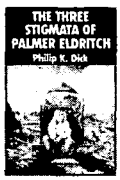

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Vol. 16 Nos. 12 & 13 (Whole Numbers 192 & 193)
November 1992
Next Issue on Sale
October 13, 1992

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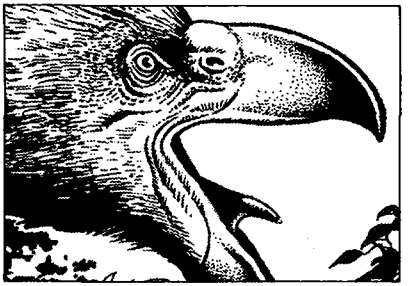

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Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)

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Sheila Williams: Managing Editor
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Terri Czeczko: Art Director

Published every 28 days which includes special issues in April and November by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 per copy ($3.25 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $40.50. (GST included in Canada) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. For back issues send $3.50 to Asimov's Science Fiction, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, © 1992 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1215 Walker Road, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 2N9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

Stories from *Asimov's* have won seventeen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received seven Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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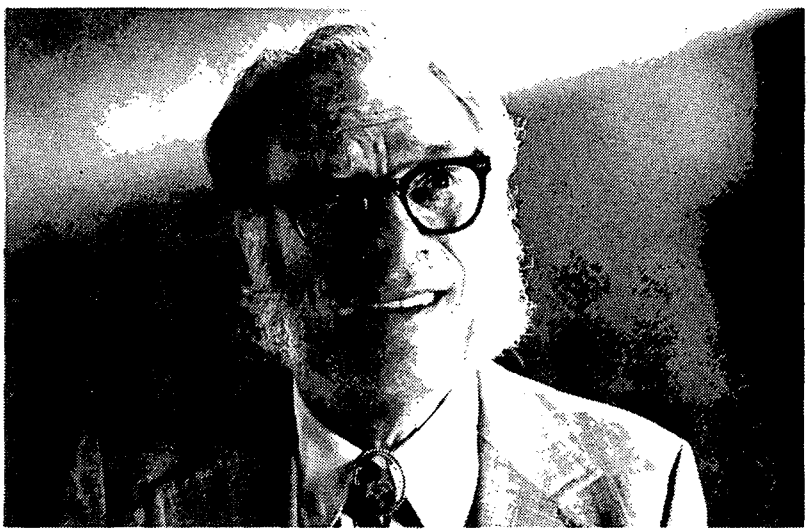
IN MEMORIAM

ISAAC ASIMOV

1920-1992



Photograph: Roy Schneider

This special issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine is dedicated to Isaac. From the beautiful cover by Michael Whelan to "The Robots' Farewell to the Master" on our last page, we have tried to put together an issue that is both a celebration of the Good Doctor, and one that he would have enjoyed reading. In these next few pages you'll find tributes from Isaac's friends and colleagues, and from his family. These memorials are amusing—because they are about a man who was gifted with a most wonderful sense of humor—and deeply moving. We thought it only appropriate that Isaac have the final word, so at the end of these tributes there is an eloquent excerpt from *Asimov Laughs Again*—the last book Isaac saw published before he died.

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Many years ago, when introducing Isaac Asimov to a Mensa Society meeting in London, I said "ladies and gentleman—there is only one Isaac Asimov." Now there is no Asimov, and the world is a much poorer place.

Isaac must have been one of the greatest educators who ever lived, with his almost half a thousand books on virtually every aspect of science and culture. His country has lost him at its moment of direst need, for he was a powerful force against the evils which seem about to overwhelm it (and much of Western society). He stood for knowledge against superstition, tolerance against bigotry, kindness against cruelty—above all, peace against war. His was one of the most effective voices against the "New Age" nitwits and fundamentalist fanatics who may now be a greater menace than the paper bear of communism ever was.

Isaac's fiction was as important as his non-fiction, because it spread the same ideas on an even wider scale. He virtually invented the science of robotics—and named it before it was born! Without preaching, he showed that knowledge was better than ignorance, and that there were other defenses against violence than violence itself.

Finally, and not least, he was great fun. He will be sorely missed by thousands of friends and millions of admirers.

—Arthur C. Clarke

ISAAC AND I

I first met Isaac Asimov on May 7, 1939, at the Queens Science Fiction League. When introduced, Isaac stood up and said:

"Now you see the world's worst science-fiction writer!"

For years he made such wildly self-deprecating remarks. Willy Ley and I once chided him about it, whereupon he said:

"But if I don't, people will think I'm conceited!"

Willy and I told him that he could avoid such a fate by simply not talking about himself. The advice had little visible effect, since the nineteen-year-old Isaac was an irrepressible extrovert, voluble, impulsive, and expansive.

Over the next two years, I ran into Isaac at science-fictional gatherings. The war news was discouraging at that time. Hitler had suddenly attacked the Soviet Union along the border established when the two powers had partitioned Poland in 1939. For a month, the Nazis made huge gains and captured millions of Russian prisoners. Isaac remarked that, the way things were going, he could look forward only to an early death. Asked why, he said:

"Because I'm a Jew."

Actually he was not an obser-

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vant and had no supernatural beliefs; but Nazis made no such distinction.

In December 1941 came Pearl Harbor. Robert Heinlein had kept in touch with an Annapolis classmate, A. B. Scoles (then a Lieutenant Commander), who had been appointed director of the Materials Laboratory of the Naval Air Experimental Station of the Philadelphia Naval Base. Aware of Robert Heinlein's writing career, Scoles thought: Why not get a few of these fellows, with technical backgrounds, who have been writing glibly about death rays and space ships, to go to work here and show what they can do?

So Heinlein went to work at the Materials Laboratory as a civilian engineer (the Navy refused to put him back in uniform because of his medical history), and I joined him when I finished my Naval training as a Lieutenant, USNR. Scoles also persuaded Isaac, then a graduate student at Columbia, to come to Philadelphia as a civilian chemist.

For three and a half years, Heinlein, Asimov, and I navigated desks and fought the war with flashing slide rules. Soon after the war, the now-defunct Philadelphia *Record* ran a feature article headed: "Stranger than Fiction." The piece derisively narrated how the Navy had hired three "mad scientists" (that is, science fiction writers) to invent super-weapons, none of which worked. There was practically not a word of truth in the article. Asimov's name was misspelled; I was wrongly identified as a University of California graduate and an "expert aerodynamicist," and so on. Asimov and I wrote angry letters, but it took a threatening call from a lawyer to make the paper back-track.

Actually, we three were assigned to separate sections and did not work together; and there was little or no mad-scientist element in our work. I tested things like hydraulic valves for Naval aircraft, trim-tab controls, and windshield de-icers. Asimov performed the chemical jobs assigned to him. Heinlein's work was so secret that to this day I do not know what he did.

Although not working together, we three, being close personal friends, socialized with our ladies on weekends. We once threw a memorable party for our science-fiction colleague Jack Williamson, who as a sergeant in a meteorological unit had visited the Naval Base. Both Asimov and Williamson tell of this party in their autobiographies.

After Hiroshima, the Experimental Station organization quickly dissolved. Heinlein returned to California, and the de Camps settled in suburban Philadelphia. Isaac was drafted and,

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after nine months in the Army, returned to Columbia. After he earned his doctorate, he went to Boston University as an Assistant Professor.

I considered Isaac Asimov one of my oldest, closest, and most beloved friends, although geographical separation kept us from seeing each other much more often than the monthly meetings of the Trap Door Spiders. This friendship endured despite differences of background, age, and temperament. In his youth, Isaac was noisy, brash, impulsive, and intensely emotional. As he explains in his autobiography, he could not resist the urge to show off, express opinions, make jokes, and "crack wise," even when he knew such acts to be contra-productive. I was more reserved, solitary, and introverted, though I forced myself to learn to do active things like riding and sailing. Isaac became more and more involved in his writing to the exclusion of all else. I have traveled the world; he disliked travel, avoided airplanes, and in recent decades refused to stir far from his typewriter.

My lifelong friendship with Isaac is one of my most precious memories. Of all the people I have known, I rate Isaac as the most intelligent. Added to this brilliance of mind was *character,* his utter, transparent integrity, which compelled him to do what he thought right, even at his own sacrifice. If, a century hence, someone writes about the two of us, I shall be honored to be briefly mentioned as "a friend of Isaac Asimov."

—L. Sprague de Camp

AN UNWRITTEN LETTER TO OUR DEAR FRIEND ISAAC ASIMOV

Dearest Isaac:

I am writing to you tonight with tears in my eyes. You have been upmost in our thoughts ever since the sad news of your passing sped across the Pacific and found us in the Malaysian island city of Singapore. We flew home to Texas yesterday and reached your brave and desolated lady just minutes past.

Janet insisted that Sprague and I abandon our plan to travel to New York next week to join the throngs converging there to honor you. We pleaded in vain when she reminded us that you would completely disapprove. Janet is right, of course; so we, your friends and fans for over half a century, will stay at home next week, remembering.

Do you recall the evening late in 1939 when we first met? Sprague invited you to dinner at our three-room apartment on Riverside Drive and 149th Street. You were nineteen, wearing a bow tie beneath your clean-shaved chin, and working your way through Colum-

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bia University by writing short stories for the science-fiction magazines. We three discussed "Nightfall," your just-finished tale, and a hundred other things.

I remember that we gave you one ounce of blended rye as the evening wore on, all unaware that you would have a bad reaction to the grape of the vine. Years later, you confessed to Sprague and me that you rode the subway three times around Manhattan Island before you could trust your errant feet to take you to the flat above the candy store where your family made its home. The allergy that first appeared on that historic night never left you.

That night, too, Isaac dear, you won the hearts of a young schoolteacher and her struggling-writer husband. You whose genius shone like a miner's lamp in an unlit tunnel, you to whom the coming years would bring fame and admirers from across the world—you told us that we were the first *goyim* who treated you as an equal.

Over the years, you have given unwavering love to friends like Sprague and me and unstinting kindness to fellow-writers in need. By your deep concern for the welfare of this small planet, so often threatened by greed and carelessness, you have set a standard of excellence that this and future generations of environmentalists can adopt. Moreover, you have bequeathed to readers of today and of tomorrow a library of books for every taste.

All in all, dear Isaac, your greatness lies in the inspiration that your life and works awake in all of us. And so "Good night, sweet prince."

—*Catherine Crook de Camp*

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Isaac was part of my life for more than half a century. Sometimes we worked together. I was his literary agent for a while, now and then his editor. We did some writing together, too—a couple of short stories long ago, and then *Our Angry Earth* just last year—but most of my memories of Isaac are not of our professional relationship but of moments we shared. I remember huddling with him over a TV set in a Boston hotel room when the first pictures of Mars were coming in, and the way he looked up at me indignantly and said, "Craters? How come neither of us ever thought of *craters* on Mars?" I remember a Caribbean cruise to watch the launch of Apollo 17, when I turned around just after liftoff and saw Isaac illuminated in that giant sunburst Saturn V rocket flare with Robert Heinlein and Ted Sturgeon beside him; I wished I had had the intelligence to take along a camera so I could photograph those faces shining in

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that wonderful light. And I remember the Futurian days, when all of us wanted so badly to get published. In those poverty-stricken Depression times Isaac was not only a friend, he was a valuable economic asset, because when the thirst struck and the bankroll was flat I could always walk across Prospect Park to where his parents had their candy store and get a free chocolate malted from his mother. Of course there are plenty of more substantial reasons to remember Isaac—all those books, all those wonderful accomplishments—but those are some of the ones that are my own.

Isaac knew he was dying, and calmly and courageously let us know it, too. But, even though I was forewarned, when CBS woke me up this morning with the word that he was gone it still hurt. There has never been anyone else like him and I don't think there ever will be again.

—Frederik Pohl

The world has lost a great writer and teacher. Those who knew him have lost a dear friend as well. Let me here recall Isaac Asimov the man.

I first met him in 1950 at a gathering in New York, along with such other demigods as L. Sprague de Camp and Willy Ley. All were as gracious and welcoming to this newcomer with a mere dozen or so items printed as they were to the most eminent colleague or, for that matter, the humblest fan. Isaac in person was a vast surprise. I had visualized a small, high-domed, reserved academic. Instead there was this guy built like a football tackle, talking ninety to the dozen and exploding firecracker strings of jests. Even the humor in his stories, most often subtle but sometimes downright Wodehousean, had not prepared me. Listening to him, however, I soon heard the wisdom inside the wit.

What contacts we had since were slight until 1959, when my wife and I made a cross-country trip from California. I wrote ahead to ask if we might call on him and his then wife in the Boston area, where they were living. It happened that he and we alike were on close terms with Anthony Boucher. Isaac wrote back to say we should visit by all means, and suggested conveying a kiss between Tony and him. Neither cared to do that directly, but why couldn't Karen be the intermediary? He had heard her described in impassioned language. Everybody concerned was delighted by the idea, she probably most.

By then he was making his mark, which was to grow big indeed, as a science fact writer. In the course of a warm and lively evening, he told us hilariously how

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Boston University had tried to drop him from its faculty because he wasn't publishing enough (!) and how he had thwarted the attempt—not because he needed the job any longer or cared about it especially but because the loss of his title would break the hearts of the two men dearest to him in this world, his father and John Campbell. That editor was so proud of having a professor among his contributors.

We met again at the same year's world science fiction convention, where as usual he was the life of the party. Among other antics, he flirted outrageously with every attractive woman, though if she gave signs of being interested in going further he'd back off, exclaiming, "I'm all talk, all talk." The ebullient public persona was not a pretense, which I think he was incapable of; it was integral to him. Yet behind it was always the deeply serious and humane larger part of his being.

Time passed. Geography and his dislike of travel made our encounters infrequent. They were generally at conventions, but whenever we were in New York and could arrange it Karen and I would go around to his apartment. We were cordially received, more than once taken out to lunch or dinner. Of course, we tried not to abuse the hospitality or keep him too long from the work that was his first desire. Occasional letters went back and forth. After acquiring his *Treasury of Humor* I fell into the habit of sending him from time to time new jokes I heard or read, in case he should compile another such book. It was a way of keeping a bit in touch.

We had our disagreements, notably political. Isaac believed in the power of intellect and good will. After all, he was abundantly endowed with both, and they served him well. Thus he usually took the positions nowadays called liberal. I suppose one would call me either a conservative libertarian or a libertarian conservative. Human lives and the fates of nations turned on some of the issues. But not even the bitter Vietnam era changed his personal friendliness, and when in this magazine we debated the desirability of a strategic defense initiative it was with mutual respect. If there were very many people like him, his politics would be the only kind that a civilized person could embrace.

Those who knew him better will have much more to remember and tell of, but I count myself fortunate nevertheless. Goodbye, Isaac, and thanks.

—Poul Anderson

SUSAN AND BAYTA AND ME

As a teenager in the 1940s, I found girls' fiction pretty boring. I read westerns and adventure and

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suspense and detective fiction. And science fiction—including Isaac Asimov's.

There I found Dr. Susan Calvin, expert in the psychology of robots, who could tell the engineers why their latest design wasn't working as expected. I found Bayta Darell: a new bride, but an honors student in history, and abler-minded than her classmate husband. It was Bayta who was prepared to kill the scholar Ebling Mis to prevent his telling the Mule when he discovered where the Second Foundation had been hidden, and did so with a single shot and no hysterics. Then there was Bayta's fourteen-year-old granddaughter Arcadia, who could think rings around her father.

I don't mean to suggest that Isaac Asimov was alone or innovative in writing strong female characters. But much SF in the forties had male characters only. Isaac was one of those (Kuttner, Heinlein, and Doc Smith come to mind as well) who went ahead and wrote about women who did things the typical young male reader could find interesting. And the 9 percent of *Astounding*'s readers who were female found them interesting, too.

—*Karen Anderson*

ISAAC

What day is it, only two days since he died? I've lost all track of time. Even knowing, for months, it didn't help. Even talking and crying with Janet and Marty the day before he went, it didn't help. I find it hurts and hurts, thinking of a world and a life without him in it. He was always there whenever I called to ask a stupid question, to tell him a new joke, to see if he and Janet were up for Chinese when I was coming into the City. Like everyone else, I loved him so; and there is no end to the hurting. I wrote a piece for *F&SF*, and all the papers that called for a remark, and the phone calls from here and overseas. It just doesn't stop squeezing my heart. So what more is there to say? That great, dear man is gone. He said he'd never live longer than his father, Judah, had lived. 1896-1969. And we all hit him with rubber chickens, telling him he had the curse of a Russian Soul, that because he knew the answers to everything—that he would live forever, and bury all the rest of us. But he did, he knew the answers to everything, even when he'd go, and sure enough he even out-thought us on that one.

So what more is there to say? Here's a little one, that in and of itself doesn't mean much, except that it was so absolutely *Isaac,* it might give you a chuckle:

Back in 1978 Ben Bova and I sued Paramount and ABC-TV and a couple of smoothyguts thugs for copyright infringement, for stealing a tv project called "Brillo,"

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based on a story Ben and I had done. And part of their defense was the cockeyed assertion that Ben and I couldn't sue them for picking *our* pockets because *we* had taken the idea for "Brillo" from Isaac's *Caves of Steel*.

So Isaac was subpoenaed to give a deposition by the deep-pockets attorneys for the studio; and I flew to New York to be there when Isaac gave his deposition: the New York Hilton, 10:10 A.M., October 1st, 1979. It rained that day.

He walked into the hotel room where I was waiting with my attorney, Henry W. Holmes, Jr., and the attorney representing the firm of Rosenfeld Meyer & Susman, Esqs., a guy named Robert H. Rotstein, Esq., and he shook off his umbrella, and he shucked out of his raincoat, and he hugged me long and hard, and Robert H. Rotstein, Esq. went several shades of pale.

For the next six hours—with but a short lunch break—this Rotstein, Esq. questioned Isaac. I have a copy of the transcript taken by the Certified Shorthand Reporter/Notary Public who took the deposition for use at the trial, and in a moment I'll quote directly from it. But it was an amazing performance.

Clearly, Rotstein, Esq. only had the vaguest idea of the man he was chivvying, only the barest notion of the size of the intellect he was trying to confound. Isaac ran him in ever-decreasing circles, always answering fully and without hesitation, perceiving in advance where some convoluted and prolix query was going, and responding at one point to the query "Do you think Mr. Ellison and Mr. Bova misappropriated *Caves of Steel*?" that he and I and Ben had been friends for almost thirty years (at that time), and that I wasn't the sort of pal who would steal from a pal, and even if I *were* that kind of rat, I wasn't stupid enough to steal one of the most famous stories ever published in the genre, and even if Ben and I *were* that stupid, that he didn't give a damn, because we were friends and if we'd needed to borrow from *Caves of Steel* it was all right with him, and he concluded with this:

"Despite everything I have heard today, and despite the fact that I'm even sensitive to the *appearance* of that sort of thing, I know absolutely that Harlan took no liberties with *The Caves of Steel*, and he is still my friend, and if I may say so, I don't believe he's the kind of person who would take undue liberties in the first place and if he were tempted to, it wouldn't be with a friend, and it wouldn't be with a book such as this."

Well, that took care of *that*.

Every time they tried at trial to introduce the concept of "borrowing" from Isaac, either my at-

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torney or the judge would wave Isaac's deposition under their noses, and they would retreat, mumbling.

But that isn't the anecdote. Nor is the anecdote that Isaac was the sort of man who would give up a full day of his life to sit in a close, overheated, uncomfortable little hotel room to be deposed (which he hated a *lot*), just to help a friend. No, the anecdote that might give you a chuckle is this:

Right at the git-go, 10:10 A.M., after the unwary Rotstein, Esq., had asked Isaac to state his name and address, here is the verbatim record of Q&A:

Q: Dr. Asimov, would you state your current occupation?

A: I'm a writer.

Q: How long have you been writing professionally?

A: Forty years. That's not approximate. That's exact.

Q: Exact? Don't you overstate? I recall from your bio data that you published your first story, called "Marooned off Vesta" sometime in the latter part of 1938.

A: It was sold on October 31, 1938; it was published, that's the magazine it was *in*, reached the newsstands on March 19, 1939. It was the March 19, 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories*. Exact is a precise word, Mr. Rotstein.

Are you chuckling? Yeah, well, terrific. That's about all we've got left, two days later. A few chuckles, a great many memories, all that love with no place left to send it, and the incalculable, profound, lifelong effect he had on millions of people. But it doesn't quell in even the smallest degree the hurt and loss that remains.

—Harlan Ellison

ISAAC

There's an enormous vacant space where he was. For all of my forty years in this field—and for a decade or so before I got here—Isaac was rampaging around the premises, writing wonderful stories, telling outrageous jokes at the top of his lungs, casually imparting vast erudition at unlikely moments, improvising astonishing limericks, flirting in a deliberately self-parodic way with any available member of the opposite sex. You never had to work hard to find him at any convention: a bow wave of laughter preceded him. He was never alone in public; crowds gathered around him like iron filings around a magnet; the Isaac Effect was immediate and unmistakable. And now, bewilderingly, he's gone.

His fiction was notable more for its ideas than for its characters, the critics like to say. And indeed two

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of the greatest characters he created—R. Daneel of *The Caves of Steel* and Andrew Martin of "The Bicentennial Man"—were robots.

But he created a third great character even more vivid and unforgettable than those two, and that was himself. I think he must have been a shy, awkward, insecure boy, with nothing much to commend him except a phenomenally high I.Q. and a clear, strong tenor voice. I suspect that he was as irritating to be around as most young geniuses are, the prototypical nerd. And it was out of such raw materials he fashioned the charming, energetic, wildly amusing, ferociously productive, marvelously entertaining man we knew, the most beloved figure in the history of science fiction.

I had the privilege of knowing him for more than thirty years—a long and rewarding friendship, in which even our occasional [benign] quarrels were interesting events. Now, like the rest of us, I have to get used to the idea of living with his absence. At least I had the opportunity to know him, for which I will always be grateful, for the universe will get only one Isaac Asimov and it was my great good luck to be on hand while he was. He leaves us all with wonderful memories; but the world is a far grimmer and grayer place now that he is no longer here.

—*Robert Silverberg*

ISAAC

This is the hardest writing task I have ever tried to do. For more than thirty-three years Isaac Asimov has been like a big brother to me. His death is like a personal blow, as if a part of me has been torn out of my body.

Isaac died at 2:30 A.M. Monday 6 April in University Hospital in Manhattan. His wife Janet and his daughter Robyn were at his bedside when he went peacefully in his sleep. He had been ill for a long time, so ill that he had been unable to write. And that, quite more than any disease, was what killed him.

For Isaac was his writing. No man has ever had so public a life. The man literally is his books. Almost all of him is on one of those millions of pages, almost every incident, every detail of a rich and mostly happy life. If you want to know Isaac, to hear his voice, to understand his thinking—just start reading. He put himself on paper, almost completely.

The "almost" is significant. What Isaac never put on paper was a harsh word about any living person. He was not a Pollyanna, and there were certainly people who hurt him. But he never used his enormous talent or his powerful position to harm anyone. Never a word. I don't think it would even have occurred to him to try.

Nor did he put on paper his own endless kindnesses and his tre-

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mendous generosity. He bragged about the number of books he had written, yes. He boasted of his sexual prowess even though he was the most faithful of husbands. But he never mentioned how unfailingly helpful he was to his fellow writers. My own career got its real start thanks to Isaac.

We had barely met, back in the mid-1950s when we both lived in the Boston area, when Isaac phoned me to say that the editor of *Amazing Stories* was going to offer me the assignment of writing a series of articles speculating on the possibilities of life on other worlds.

"She wanted me to do it," Isaac explained cheerfully, "but I'm too busy so I told her you knew more about the subject than I do."

Before I could say anything more than, "But—but—" Isaac went on, "Don't worry about it. I'll tell you everything I know, and you *must* know something that I don't, so you'll know more about the subject than I do!"

He was as good as his word, and that series of articles established me as a recognized name in the science-fiction world.

For years—no, decades—any writer in the field could phone Isaac with questions about science. He was an invaluable human encyclopedia for us all.

And the only person he ever criticized in print was himself. When he started to write the first volume of his autobiography, he seemed worried that it was getting so long. "I've written six hundred pages and I'm only nine years old and nothing has happened yet," he said.

Then he told me that he was going to be absolutely honest and put down every dumb thing he had ever done in his life. "No wonder it's getting so long," I blurted. He put *that* into the second volume.

I have a thousand happy memories of Isaac. Only the past year and a half have been sad. "I'm seventy-one and half years old," he told me from his hospital room last year, "and I don't like it."

Isaac is a true Horatio Alger story, a tale of the American dream come vividly to life. Born in Russia, brought to Brooklyn when he was three, working in his parents' candy store as a youth, he was attracted to the fanciful covers of the early science fiction magazines. Anyone who disdains the "lurid" covers of those "pulp" magazines should hang their head in shame: those magazines gave us Isaac.

No matter how successful and famous he became, in his own mind Isaac always saw himself as that poor kid working hard to get ahead.

Work hard he did. And cheerfully. Isaac was one of those very rare writers who really enjoyed the physical act of writing. Most of my friends are writers. Hardly any of

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them thinks of their actual work at the keyboard as fun. It's tough, draining, exhausting labor. Not for Isaac! To him, a perfect day was to get up bright and early, go to his office, and write until suppertime. Maybe a break for lunch.

That's how he produced all those books. And articles. And short stories. And limericks. He *worked.* He *enjoyed* his work. He would not willingly get into an airplane, and he went to sea on cruise liners with some trepidation (Janet loves to sail), but he could roam the universe in his mind. We are all the richer for it.

A word about his writing. Some have said Isaac was no stylist. Some have said his kind of science fiction went out with the dinosaurs. Some have said that his nonfiction writings about science were "mere popularizations."

Isaac always said that he was a genius. He was certain of that and he saw nothing wrong with telling the world that it was so. In assessing his work, I would have to agree with Isaac rather than his detractors. He *was* a genius. His genius lay in the uncanny ability to take any subject, no matter how abstruse, and explain it so that anyone who could read could understand the basics of that subject. That takes real genius. If that is "mere popularization," then what the world needs is more popularizers. I have tried writing about science, with some modicum of success. But I stand in awe of Isaac's ability to make readable sense out of anything, in a style that sounds just as if he's having a conversation with you.

Isaac almost single-handedly created the field of science "popularization." Before he turned his hand to writing books about science for the general reader, science popularizations were rarely published. Once in a while a prominent scientist might turn out a book on his own specialty, but these were few and far-between.

Isaac created an industry in books about science for the average reader. Today's Carl Sagans, Lewis Thomases, Steven Jay Goulds and Dennis Overbyes owe their publishing opportunities to Asimov. Nationally popular magazines such as *Omni* and *Discover* would never have been started if Asimov had not proved that publishers can make money from science writing.

His fiction is a monument to this field. His early works are classics. His later novel, *The Gods Themselves,* which won a Nebula and a Hugo, he wrote mostly as a challenge to himself to see if he could re-enter the fiction field after having written only nonfiction for more years than most of his critics had to their lives.

Although he modestly gave the credit to editor John Campbell, Isaac invented the Three Laws of

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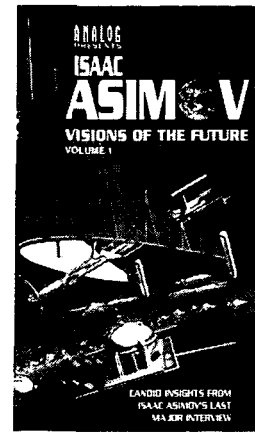

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Robotics. His robot stories inspired a whole generation of young technophiles to try to build the machines that they read about in Isaac's stories. In that sense, Isaac did not predict the future so much as create it.

He has been called "a natural resource and a national treasure." He was that, and more. Despite his façade of braggadocio he was basically a modest man. A hard worker. A giant in American literature. A good and faithful friend.

There is an oft-told story about the first time Harlan Ellison met Isaac. Harlan says that after reading so many Asimov stories in his youth, he expected their author to be a mighty-thewed superhero with a positronic brain.

He was, sort of. All that and more. There will never be another like him.

But before I break down and cry, let me recall one of thousands of happy moments. Isaac once told me that when he started reading the science-fiction magazines off the rack of his father's store, the old man was very suspicious about their contents. Isaac explained that he was reading science fiction; it was about science, which his European-educated father could appreciate.

"Science fiction?" his father asked. "Like Jules Verne?"

"Who?" asked young Isaac.

"Jules Verne," pronouncing it with a decided French accent. "Surely you've heard of him. He wrote *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,* and *From the Earth to the Moon* —"

"Oh!" exclaimed Brooklyn-educated Isaac. "You mean Jooles Voine!"

That's the Isaac I want to remember. Happy. Loving. My friend. My brother.

—Ben Bova

Isaac Asimov, one of the great explainers of the age, died in New York City on April 6, 1992 at age 72.

The Planetary Society, dedicated to planetary exploration and the search for extraterrestrial life, is the largest space interest group in the world. Dr. Asimov was a member of the Planetary Society's Board of Advisors from the beginning, lectured to our members, participated in our functions, and sent out membership solicitations on our behalf. Through his writings he helped generate an intellectual climate that permitted the exploration of the solar system and did much to communicate the wonders of the planets. He was a true friend of the Planetary Society, and we shall miss him.

Like T. H. Huxley, Asimov was motivated by profoundly democratic impulses to communicate science to the public. "Science is

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too important," he said, paraphrasing Clemenceau, "to be left to the scientists." It will never be known how many practicing scientists today, in how many countries, owe their initial inspiration to a book, article, or short story by Isaac Asimov—nor how many ordinary citizens are sympathetic to the scientific enterprise from the same cause. For example, Marvin Minsky of MIT, one of the pioneers of Artificial Intelligence and an advisor to the Society, was brought to his subject by Asimov's robot stories (initially conceived to illustrate human/robot partnerships and to counter the prevailing notion, going back to *Frankenstein,* of robots as necessarily malign). At a time when science fiction was mainly devoted to action and adventure, Asimov introduced puzzle-solving schemes that taught science and thinking along the way.

A number of his phrases and ideas have insinuated themselves into the culture of science—for example, his spare description of the solar system as "four planets plus debris," or his notion of one day carrying icebergs from the rings of Saturn to the arid wastelands of Mars. He wrote many science books for young people, and made many efforts to encourage young writers.

Asimov spoke out in favor of science and reason and against pseudoscience and superstition. He was a Founding Fellow of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, and President of the American Humanist Association. He was not afraid to criticize the U.S. government and was deeply committed to stabilizing world population growth.

The microscopic probe he described in his novel *Fantastic Voyage*—that could enter the human bloodstream and repair tissue damage—was, sadly, not yet available at the time of his death. As someone born in grinding poverty, and with a lifelong passion to write and explain, Asimov by his own standards led a successful and happy life, and in one of his last books admonished us not to worry about him.

I don't. Instead, I worry about the rest of us, with no Isaac Asimov around to inspire the young to learning and to science.

—Carl Sagan

Isaac would want me to start with a joke, so here goes:

I once tried to do a bibliography of all of Isaac's published work.

Pretty funny, huh?

I even got my university to give me a year's sabbatical to work on it—that's another joke, although I was earnest enough at the time. It was impossible, because Isaac pro-

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duced too much, with articles under so many variant titles, with so many combinations of omnibus volumes, with so many abridged editions, that I don't think anyone will ever be able to produce a complete listing. The foreign editions of his books alone run well into the thousands.

Many of you know how wonderful Isaac was to me, how much we cared about each other, and how important he was in my life. Let me relate a few anecdotes that will tell you something about Isaac and what was important to *him*:

Isaac had millions of fans, and he received what must have seemed like millions of fan letters. Before failing health overtook him he answered every letter, briefly of course, usually but not always with a postcard, but he tried not to answer the same person twice —and his legendary memory enabled him to remember almost every exchange. His letters and papers are up at the library at Boston University, but he kept three fan letters (and only three) at home that tell you much about the incredible diversity of his readers and admirers—one from Dwight David Eisenhower, one from Orson Welles, and the one that I think meant the most to him, from Tommy Smothers.

One time I arrived at his apartment to find him in his underwear, sitting cross-legged on the floor, happy as a lark. He was indexing one of his giant science books, sitting there placing 3 × 5 index cards in neat little piles around him.

He owned and used a computer by then, but when I suggested there existed some excellent dedicated index software that would cut the time involved to a fraction of doing it by hand, he looked at me with a horrified expression and said, "but that wouldn't be any fun!" And as Janet, who he loved dearly, can tell you—it really was fun for him. Of the many hundreds of writers in various genres I have come to know and work with, Isaac was unique—for him, writing was as natural as breathing—no pain, no angst, no blocks—just pure joy. The words flowed from him effortlessly; he had enormous stamina. He was also as natural a speaker as he was a writer, a rare combination in itself. He loved to do both.

For more than a decade we talked every night of the year with few exceptions; we talked about everything—current events, politics, science, simply everything—how Sally, Roz, and Janet put up with it I'll never know. He was like a second father to me, and the best and most loyal friend a man could ever have.

And I still jump every time the phone rings.

—*Martin H. Greenberg*

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OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

I was at the American Chemical Society meeting in San Francisco when I heard about Isaac's death. The next day one of the presented papers was on his chemistry-related science fiction stories. "I didn't plan on this paper being a memorial," the speaker said. "As you all know, Isaac Asimov died yesterday." They didn't all know, and behind me a chemist said, "Oh, no!" as if he had just been told about the death of a dear friend.

It reminded me of something that had happened at choir practice a few weeks before. Isaac's illness had been announced in *F&SF*, and after practice a soprano came up to me. "How is Isaac doing?" she asked, as if he were a mutual friend. Which I think he was. Isaac wasn't just another famous person, a "celebrity" whose name was familiar because it was in the news. People felt like they *knew* him—through his editorials, through his science columns, through his stories and books.

Maybe it was because he put so much of himself into those stories and columns and editorials. He frequently said his writing was his life, and everyone who read "the Good Doctor" 's comments in *Asimov's* felt like they were in the same room with him, listening to him talk. He was interested in everything, especially science, which he could explain better than anybody. (My husband uses battered copies of *The Universe* and *Understanding Physics* to explain complicated concepts to his physics students because "Asimov can make anything seem simple.")

Nothing shows his love of science better than his science fiction. Not just his robot stories—my personal favorites—and the *Foundation* series, but less known stories like "The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimoline," which had a packed roomful of ACS members rolling in the aisles (they even laughed at the graphs), and his classic scientific explanation of how the goose laid those golden eggs, "Pâté de Foie Gras." He's *in* those stories—his clear-headed logic, his mischievous wit, his energy, and, above all, his boundless love of science. It's no wonder everyone feels like they knew him.

He will be sorely missed. By my husband and the hundreds of other science teachers who relied on his science books and articles to explain difficult subjects with dazzling clarity. By everyone who got to know "the Good Doctor" through his answers to their letters to *Asimov's*. By my librarian and all the hundreds of other librarians who use his eloquent defenses of books and freedom of speech to fight censorship. By everyone who loves robots and mysteries and science. By chemists and choir members and

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all the other people who thought of him as a friend. By me.

He will be missed and missed and missed.

—*Connie Willis*

ISAAC ASIMOV: AN AFFECTIONATE MEMORY

Writing in *Time* Magazine, book critic Stefan Kanfer said of Isaac "The vertical pronoun frequently occurs in the author's conversation, but there is as much self-concealment as self-promotion in his talk."

Actually, I think there was a genuine enjoyment of his fame; a kind of genial bemusement.

Three years ago I discovered a message on my answering machine: "This is for Jane. Please call Isaac Asimov. A-S-I-M-O-V." It was so charmingly revealing, so astonishing, I left it on for a month and played it over and over for friends and family.

I was the SFWA president during whose term Isaac received his Grand Master Award. At that time everyone who had been awarded a Grand Master was still alive and there was a kind of ongoing joke that receiving one conferred immortality. Oh Isaac—I wish that were so. But the law of averages—which you could explain better than anyone—still works. At least one of your books is sure to remain in print forever.

—*Jane Yolen*

How to bid a true and dignified good-bye to Isaac Asimov? How indeed? He was a genius, and he knew it. He had an ego the size of Jupiter, and justifiably so, and he had the grace to know that too, and take the piss out of himself when he felt he needed it. He was the grandest of intellects, surely one of the great minds of the twentieth century, and yet, behind a smokescreen of Great Man wisecracks, the humblest of men with friends and readers.

I remember a party at my apartment in New York where a guest approached Isaac. "You are the great Dr. Asimov?" she said, setting him up and continuing to sing his fulsome praises as his grin spread towards his ears.

"Indeed I am," Isaac said when she had finished.

"Well, your socks are falling down."

Isaac looked down. They were. He laughed and laughed and laughed.

This was the author of hundreds of learned tomes, who nevertheless could write *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man* by Dr. A and appear anonymously on the back cover with a bra for a mask. This was the author of a thousand limericks, and a thousand and one unprintable ones.

This was also the man whose three laws of robotics have proba-

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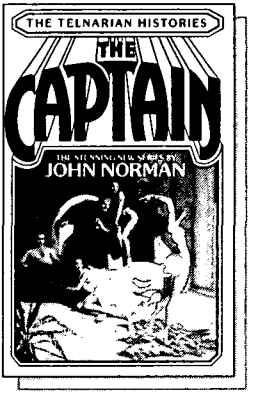

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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

Gibbons' *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* set forth a historical model for the disintegration of a civilization that had grown too large and gotten too corrupt. This is the same sort of setup that exists in John Norman's *Telnarian* series. In *The Captain*, might dictates right as the empire continues to deteriorate, paving the way for a new, more able leader. Once again, even in the far future, the cycle of history repeats itself.

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ALSO THIS MONTH:

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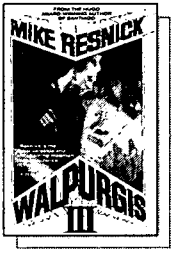
by Mike Resnick



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bly set the framework for human-cybernetic moral calculus forever. The author of the *Foundation* books, and *The Caves of Steel, The Naked Sun, The Gods Themselves*, and a handful of absolutely perfect short stories like "Nightfall" and "The Ugly Little Boy." This is the man who can fairly be called the greatest, most prolific, most puissant popularizer of science who ever lived.

He loved writing with a boyish innocence. He never had an agent. He almost never turned an assignment down. When I asked him why a great writer like himself had agreed to write a novelization of a schlocky movie like *Fantastic Voyage*, he shrugged, and said simply: "They asked me." Then he frowned, and got about as angry as I'd ever seen him get, which wasn't much. "They also promised I'd get to meet Raquel Welch," he said sadly. "But they lied."

Her loss, old friend, an honor that Ms. Welch, alas, will now never get to have, a pleasure she will be forever denied, though of course you never really did see the world that way, despite many stories on yourself to the contrary.

So farewell to dear Dr. A
The purest of spirits I say
The Prince of the Pen
And the sweetest of men
Ever to have enlightened our way.

—Norman Spinrad

My personal relationship with Isaac dates back some twenty-five years, when he would make his grand entrance into the editorial offices of *Ellery Queen's Mystery* to deliver his latest Black Widower story.

Now, in sharing the literary world's loss of this most unique individual, it is comforting to know of the tens of thousands of new fans who have been introduced to the wonderful world of science fiction through the fifteen-year history of *Asimov's*, a labor of love for us both.

My memories of his friendship, ready wit, and warm personality are as vivid today as they were at our initial meeting. His massive contributions to the literary world and, in particular, in extolling the virtues of the value of print, will remain his legacy and provide some small comfort to the great loss experienced by his family, friends, and countless readers throughout the world.

—Joel Davis

Science fiction, they say, is supposed to create a "sense of wonder," but it accomplishes this all too rarely. There was, however, a science fiction *writer* who accomplished it on a daily basis. No one who knew Isaac Asimov, or even knew *of* him, could fail to be amazed by his prodigious abilities

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in every field to which he turned his hand.

I first met Isaac in 1978, when, as a mild-mannered editorial assistant, I was introduced to him on my second or third day on the job. As is the case with most of the reading world, he'd been one of my heroes practically since I'd been old enough to read. As I read more and more SF, he became almost a mythical figure, his name turning up in book after book, magazine after magazine. His Laws of Robotics appeared in stories and TV plots and books that weren't even his. I'd read of things called "cons" at which one could actually meet this Dr. Asimov, but that seemed beyond the realm of possibility to me. And suddenly, here he was. In the flesh, so to speak.

It's a sad fact of life that when you meet one of your long-time heroes you are often disappointed. He or she may well turn out to be unpleasant, unclean, or unfriendly. This demi-god, this paragon of virtue, turns out to be only human after all. In fact, the only exception that I have ever encountered to this universal rule was Isaac Asimov. Not only was he exactly as I'd pictured him, he was more so. God, he was full of life. Life and songs and jokes and limericks and god-awful puns. He was not only the demi-god I'd envisioned, he was practically a candidate for full-fledged deification.

I was not the only one to think so, either. As editor of the magazine, I read all the reader mail before it was forwarded to Isaac, and one day I came upon a letter so remarkable it has stuck with me to this day. A woman proclaimed proudly that she had at last unmasked the true identity of Isaac Asimov. His name was only a not-too-clever alias, she wrote, meant to explain his true nature to those wise enough to see through it. Of course no mere human could write all those books or know all the things in all the fields that Isaac did, and his name, the woman said, proved it. Isaac Asimov—clear enough:

"I sack as I move." *Not very well disguised, are you, "Doctor"?* she wrote.

Isaac and I shared a good laugh over the letter. Not a likely candidate for sainthood, was Isaac, much less godhood, at least according to the rather narrow standards applied by most of the world's organized religions. But if these labels were to be applied fairly, to those who enriched the world and the people they touched, who left the universe a better, finer, saner, smarter place than they found it, then Isaac Asimov's name should be at the top of the scroll.

I miss him more than I can say.

—Shawna McCarthy

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Isaac Asimov is perhaps best known, these days, for the sheer volume of his output. Those who are actually familiar with his writing remember also the immense scope of such works as the *Foundation* series, and the even larger future history to which that belonged. Those are part of what I remember, too, of course, as are the impact of such stories as "Nightfall" and "The Dead Past" when I first read them. But I also remember with special fondness a little gem of a story, barely two pages long, called "The Immortal Bard."

The plot is simple: a physicist builds a time machine, brings Shakespeare back to the twentieth century, and enrolls him in a colleague's Shakespeare course—which he flunks. "What cannot be wracked from words in five centuries?" poor Will laments. "One could wring, methinks, a flood from a damp clout!"

I could hear Isaac in those words. He didn't think much of critics who made careers out of digging "hidden meanings" out of other people's creativity, or of writers who bury their meanings in obscure verbiage. Isaac wrote with a straightforward lucidity that left little doubt about what he was trying to say. It has become fashionable in some circles to disparage this quality as "lack of style," but I decided quite early that it was something rare, refreshing, and richly deserving of emulation. I still think so.

Isaac was one of my favorite people decades before I met him, for the myriad hours of entertainment and mental stimulation he gave me, and for the kind of mind I could tell had produced them. Later I had the privilege of knowing him as a friend, and my admiration only increased. Among my most pleasant memories are the science fiction weekends Joyce and I spent with Isaac and Janet at Mohonk Mountain House in New York. His writings enriched my life immensely, but what I'll miss most is Isaac himself.

—*Stanley Schmidt*

When I was sixteen, my dad took me to my first science fiction convention. Beforehand, he wrote to Isaac Asimov telling him how much we wanted to meet someone who, quoting from Isaac's own description of himself in his introduction to *The Hugo Winners*, was "sane and rational, fearless and intrepid, witty and forceful, and, above all, devilishly handsome," someone, he added, who reminded him of himself. Isaac wrote back that though he would probably be mobbed by his fans, he was sure that if I were as charming and sweet as most sixteen-year-olds, he'd be able to find a few minutes to talk to us.

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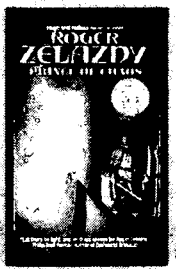

AMBER #10:
PRINCE OF CHAOS
by Roger Zelazny

The long awaited final volume in Merlin's sequence of Amber novels. "The world of Amber is a complex, graceful and welcoming as ever."
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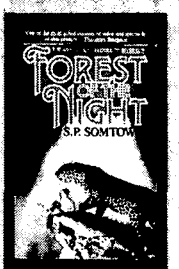
THE CULT OF LOVING KINDNESS
by Paul Park

A *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year for 1991, this is the third and final volume in the Starbridge Chronicles, successor to the highly regarded *Soldiers of Paradise* and *Sugar Rain*.



FOREST OF THE NIGHT
by S.P. Somtow

The sequel to the majestic and mysterious *Riverrun*, from the author of *Vampire Junction*. "Fantasy novels don't come any better than this."
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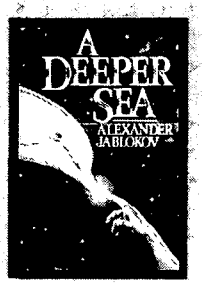

A DEEPER SEA
by Alexander Jablokov
A masterwork of exhilarating intelligence and breathtaking vision, A DEEPER SEA firmly places Alexander Jablokov in the upper echelon of science fiction luminaries. "Jablokov's writing is both clear and scintilating...well-invented and fascinating."
--Fantasy and Science Fiction

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I was completely in awe of Isaac. I was also awkward and shy. I did not think myself particularly charming, and I was absolutely mortified when midway through the banquet, my father decided it was time to go over and introduce ourselves to Isaac. With his prodigious memory, Isaac immediately recalled their correspondence and delightedly insisted we join his table. This table was directly in front of the headtable, and for the next hour, Isaac heckled the toast master and traded good-natured barbs with the speaker. When his masculinity was jokingly attacked, Isaac seized my hand and waved it wildly in the air for all to see. By rights, I should have died of embarrassment, but I was having too much fun to remember to do so.

At the time, I thought that this experience, sitting with the quintessential public Isaac Asimov, would be one of the highlights of my life. Yet, though the incident remains a fond memory, what I truly treasure was that I became the colleague and the friend of the private man at the magazine that bears his name.

For the past ten years, I've spent a part of nearly every Tuesday morning with Isaac. His visits to the office were both joyous and serious. Isaac told me jokes and limericks, and sang snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan (often inventing his own lyrics). He tried out material that was going into his editorials and his speeches, and we talked about almost everything—from politics, religion, science, and history to people inside and out of the science fiction field, letters from the readers, and of course, the magazine.

Isaac loved the magazine. He didn't have to stop by every week. We could have handled everything over the phone and through the mail, but I know he enjoyed coming in to see us. He saw the magazine as a continuing forum for the short story writer. Science fiction magazines had given his stories their first home, and he wanted to be sure that that tradition continued for other writers. He stood behind us one hundred percent, and every one of our successes gladdened him.

He did miss a few Tuesdays. Sometimes due to illness, and sometimes because Janet had actually convinced him to take a break and spend a couple of days out of town. While we missed him on the days he was away, I knew that a two- or three-day trip to Mohonk or Washington, D.C. meant he would bounce back in the following week with a story about George and Azazel or a mystery for *Ellery Queen.*

Tuesdays are a lot quieter and emptier around the office now. They have been ever since he first fell seriously ill. I miss his visits, I miss being called "Sweet Sheila" in his editorials, and I miss this sane and rational, fearless and intrepid,

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witty and forceful and irreplaceable man. I'm happy, though, to have lived in a world in which Isaac Asimov was my own dear sweet friend.

—Sheila Williams

REMEMBERING ISAAC

Several years ago, Isaac dedicated one of his books to me. In the dedication, he said: "To my brother, with whom I have never exchanged a cross word." And that was true.

Of course, that didn't mean we didn't joke with one another or have a laugh at the other's expense. And if it would produce a laugh, Isaac was not above a little exaggeration.

About twenty years ago, he spoke at a book and author luncheon sponsored by *Newsday*. The audience consisted predominantly of Jewish women, and Isaac knew how to win them over.

"I have a Jewish mother, who is sitting in the audience now," he began. "Momma, stand up and take a bow." (Which she did.)

"My brother is also here at the table with my mother," Isaac said. "He's Stan Asimov, and he's assistant publisher of *Newsday*. Of course, I wouldn't say that my mother plays favorites, for how can a Jewish mother play favorites? Still, I am the first-born, and you know what that means.

"For instance, when this luncheon was being planned, my mother asked me: 'Isaac, will it be possible for me to sit with you?' I said, 'No, momma, I'll be on the dais. You'll sit with Stanley.'

"And my mother said: 'Stanley who?' "

My mother stood up and shook her fist at Isaac. But it didn't matter. By that time, the audience was in his hands. And when I got back to my office, there was a sign on my desk: "Stanley Who?"

Isaac has created a number of worlds. But he sometimes had difficulty in the world that all of us live in. This led to a collection of what we both called "My Stupid Brother Isaac Stories."

Many years ago, Isaac and his family were visiting my family on a very hot Saturday on Long Island. He was at a nearby motel, and his car wouldn't start. So we walked down a busy highway to a garage to get a mechanic. The mechanic wouldn't come. So we tried calling other service stations with no success. After about an hour and a half, we gave up and returned to the car, hot and sweaty. And I had a question for my brother:

"How is it, Isaac, that someone who is the genius you claim to be isn't bright enough to join the AAA?"

And Isaac replied: "What do you mean, not bright enough. I am a member. Here's my card."

I've always lived in Isaac's shadow, but because we liked each

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other so much, I never minded being my brother's brother. Almost every week, someone would ask me if I were related to Isaac Asimov. I always said yes. But I never brought up the relationship on my own—except once.

About six years ago, my wife Ruth and I were standing in front of a bookstore in Munich, Germany. Suddenly, we realized that the display window was filled with science fiction books. And not only that, they were all by Isaac. As we stood there, we realized that several young Americans were also looking at the window.

"Do you see that autobiography by Isaac Asimov?" a woman in the group was saying. "He wrote that with the help of diaries that he had been keeping since he was a teenager."

I turned to Ruth: "Should I make her day?" Ruth nodded yes. So I said to the woman: "I'm glad you liked my brother's autobiography."

She looked at me and said: "You must be Stanley!"

I told this to Isaac and he roared with laughter. Then I added that the story wasn't done. I said that a young man in the group told me that when he was a student at MIT, he had met Isaac. "I went into this elevator," he said, "and there was this old man. . . ."

And I roared with laughter.

People frequently asked me how Isaac had learned everything that he wrote about. I replied that my brother had a photographic memory. He could remember everything that he had ever heard or read. When ordinary people had a memory problem, it was because they couldn't remember something. Isaac said he had a "forgettery" problem. He couldn't forget.

For instance, back in 1969, shortly after our father died, Isaac and I spent hours telling each other stories about our parents.

"Do you remember, Stanley," Isaac recalled, "when you were a little kid and you were throwing a rubber ball against the wall outside the candy store? Momma asked you to stop. You didn't stop. So momma asked me to stop you.

"I called over to you and said: 'Stanley, throw the ball to me.' You did, and I threw the ball over the roof of the building and you started to cry. Do you remember?"

I confessed that I didn't. Isaac shook his head and said: "To think, for thirty-two years, I've felt guilty about that."

Neither Isaac nor I were religious, but we felt that we ought to have a rabbi for our father's funeral. A new rabbi had just come to the synagogue near my home on Long Island, and he conducted the service. Afterward, in the car on the way to the cemetery, Isaac and I were joking and laughing about our father.

After a while, the rabbi said: "This is a solemn occasion. Why are you joking and laughing?"

"Rabbi," Isaac replied, "neither Stanley nor I have ever said an

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angry word to our father. He lived to see both of us become successful in our careers. On the day before he died, the New York *Times* Book Section wrote an article about me and this caused both Stanley and me to speak with him on that day. We loved him and have nothing to apologize about. So we think it's appropriate to tell jokes and laugh."

And that's why I think it's appropriate to tell jokes and laugh about Isaac.

—Stanley Asimov

The day before Isaac died, Robyn, Stan, Ruth, and I were all in his hospital room. He couldn't really talk, but he smiled at us when conscious. At one point I said to him, "Isaac, you're the best there is." He smiled faintly, shrugged and nodded. We all laughed and he seemed to relax.

He was indeed the best. He once had a dream in which someone said that Isaac Asimov made his money out of beaten swords. Still in the dream, and in real life after he woke up, Isaac ran to tell me how happy he was to know that he earned a living from the instruments of peace—that thou shalt beat thy swords into plowshares —but in Isaac's case, into pens, for the pen is mightier than the sword.

Isaac filled his life with creative work, with love, and with ebullient good humor. He loved to laugh and make others laugh. He was a joyous man. Please remember him that way.

—Janet Asimov

THE LAST WORD

Janet and I met on May 1, 1959, and fell in love at once. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about it. I was married. It was an unhappy marriage, but I was married. And I had two small children.

So we could only correspond and yearn for each other, until my marriage broke up. Since then, we have lived together, gotten married, and the point is that for thirty-two years now we have stayed deeply in love.

I'm afraid that my life has just about run its course and I don't really expect to live much longer. However, our love remains and I have no complaints.

In my life, I have had Janet and I have had my daughter, Robyn, and my son, David; I have had a large number of good friends; I have had my writing and the fame and fortune it has brought me; and no matter what happens to me now, it's been a good life, and I am satisfied with it.

So please don't worry about me, or feel bad. Instead I only hope that this book has brought you a few laughs.

—Isaac Asimov

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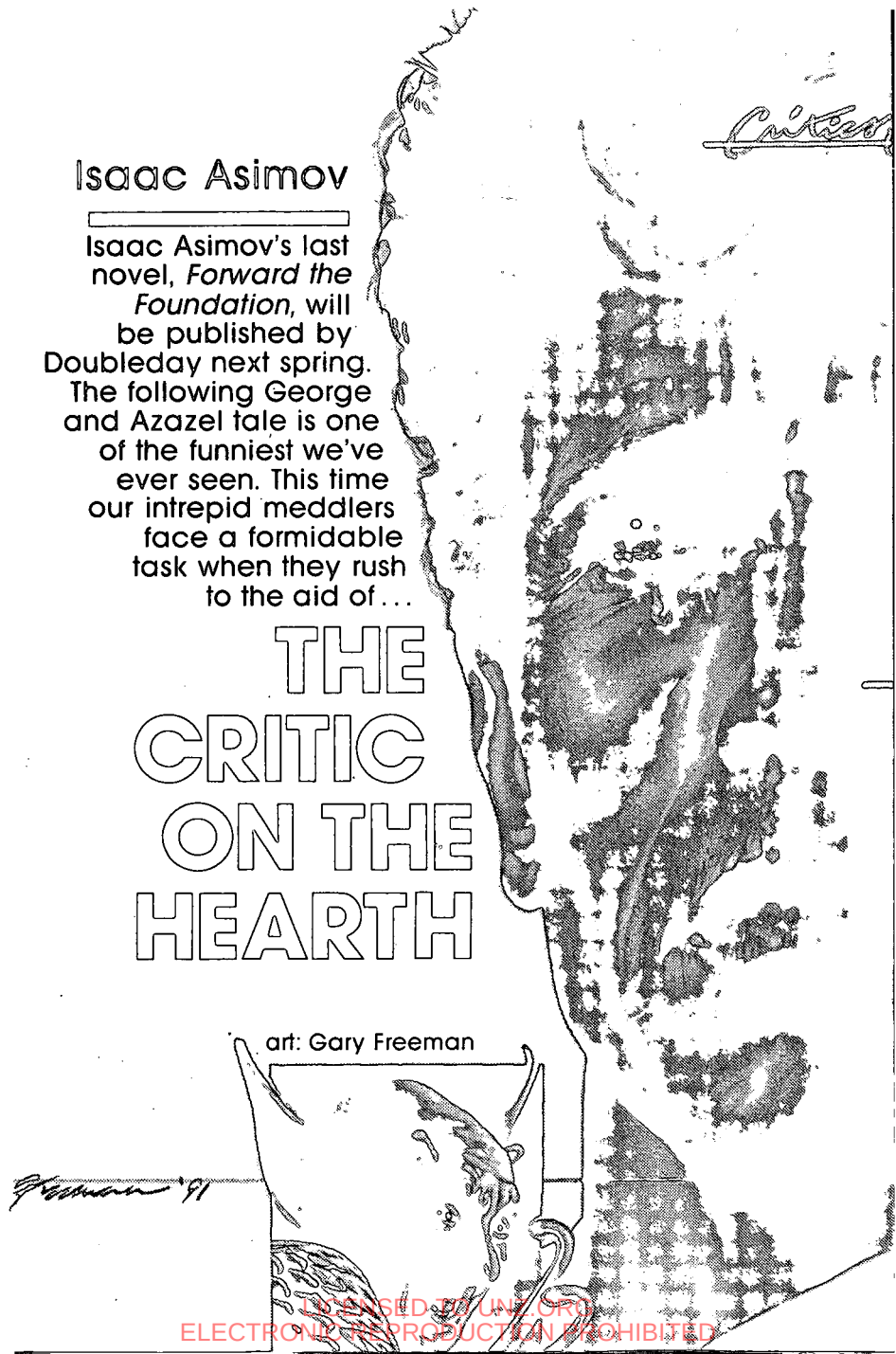
Isaac Asimov

Isaac Asimov's last novel, *Forward the Foundation*, will be published by Doubleday next spring. The following George and Azazel tale is one of the funniest we've ever seen. This time our intrepid meddlers face a formidable task when they rush to the aid of...

THE CRITIC ON THE HEARTH

art: Gary Freeman



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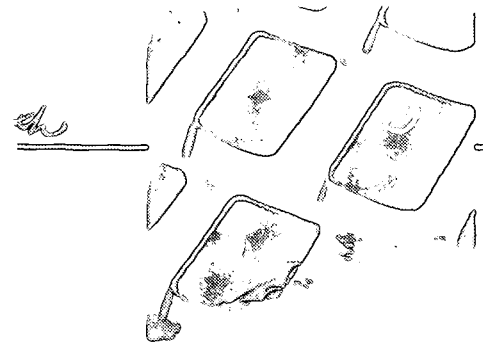
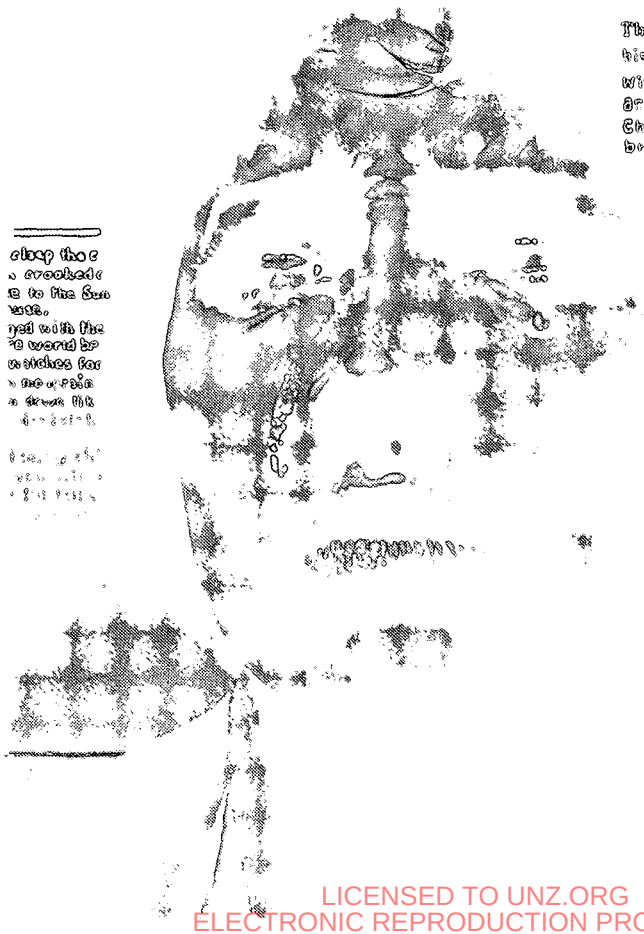


HANG ME UP BY MY HAIR

by Agatha Dorothy [illegible]



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I had been brooding a bit during the course of the dinner with George, but I finally said, "Would you like to hear what Samuel Taylor Coleridge thought of critics?"

"No," said George.

"Good! Then I'll tell you. He said, 'Reviewers are usually people who would have been poets, historians, biographers, etc. if they could; they have tried their talents at one or at the other, and have failed; therefore they turn critics.' Percy Bysshe Shelley said almost the same thing. Mark Twain said, 'The trade of critic, in literature, music, and the drama, is the most degraded of all trades.'

"Lawrence Sterne said, 'Of all the cants which are canted in this canting world . . . the cant of criticism is the most tormenting.' Twenty-three centuries ago, the Greek artist, Zeuxis, said, 'Criticism comes easier than craftsmanship.' Lord Byron said, 'Critics all are ready made, with just enough learning to misquote.' He also said, 'As soon seek roses in December, ice in June, Hope constancy in wind, or corn in chaff. Believe a woman or an epitaph, Or any other thing that's false, before you trust in critics.' —I could go on and on."

"You are going on and on," said George. "What do you do? Memorize these things?"

"Yes, I have lots more."

"Don't quote them."

"I have two of my own comments. The first is that every critic ought to become a garbage collector. He will be doing more useful work and he will have a higher social position. The second is that every critic ought to be thrown into the fireplace."

"And become the critic in the hearth, eh? And all this, I gather, because one of your miserable productions received a truthful review from some hard-working artisan who had been forced to read through your swill."

At this point, a brilliant idea crossed my mind. "George," I said, "have you ever known a critic and tried to help him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you have bent my ear most grievously with your tales of your little demon, what's his name, and the miseries he has inflicted through you on innocent victims. Surely, there has been an occasion when you have inflicted the miseries on someone well worth it—a critic, in other words."

George said, thoughtfully, "There is indeed the case of Lucius Lamar Hazeltine."

"A critic?"

"Yes, but I doubt that you have ever heard of him. He doesn't work with your kind of trash, as a general rule."

"And you tried to help him?"

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"I did."

For the first time in our long acquaintanceship, I made no effort to abort one of his stories. "Give me all the details," I said, gloatingly.

Lucius Lamar Hazeltine [said George], although a critic, is a most remarkably handsome young man. In fact, I have never known anyone more handsome than he except for myself in my somewhat younger days.

It is to his good looks entirely that I attribute his ability to remain a critic for ten long years and yet retain an unscarred face and an unbroken nose. As you, of all people, know very well, critics are constantly faced with the possibility of being struck with generous force by writers who object to being described as "meretricious purveyors of organic dreck."

Hazeltine, however, had so nearly the look of an angel from heaven with his clear, blue eyes, his golden curls, his pink complexion, his beautiful nose and manly chin that one could see writer after writer striding toward him with malevolent intent, only to waver and turn away. They did not want to be responsible for spoiling perfection. Undoubtedly, they cursed their own weakness, and it must have occurred to them that if one among them, but one, were to consent to bang up Hazeltine a bit, his perfection would be gone and the rest could then pounce on him with unrestrained fury.

However, none wished to be the villain of the piece.

For a while, the hopes of the writing fraternity rested on Agatha Dorothy Lissauer. Perhaps you have heard of her. She writes murder mysteries that delve ferociously into the inner workings of psychotics. Her stories are so replete with details of the most repellent sort that even critics find themselves irresistably drawn to her. One critic said, "For slime, Agatha Dorothy Lissauer cannot be touched." Another said, "Horrifying disgust fills every sentence."

Naturally, a delicately nurtured young woman would feel glee and delight at having her work described in this fashion and, at a meeting of the Crime Writers Association, she was the only writer to stand up and defend the art of criticism, to the slack-jawed astonishment of every decent writer in the place.

It was, however, Lucius Lamar Hazeltine who taught her better. He had ignored her first dozen books totally, but her new book, *Wash Your Hands in My Blood,* seemed to attract his attention. He said, among other things, "*Wash Your Hands in My Blood* attempts to upset the stomach and at times I became aware of a very mild feeling of nausea, but nothing more than that. I find myself astonished that any young woman cannot do better. The book might as well have been written by a man."

On reading this, Agatha Dorothy Lissauer burst into tears and then,

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afterward, her lips set firmly, and a cold hard look in her glorious eyes, she went from livery stable to livery stable pricing horsewhips.

Hazeltine, she knew, was a member of the Critics Congregation, a gathering of the profession who met in an obscure tenement in the wilds of the South Bronx, where they felt, quite justifiably, no one would dare follow them. Ms. Lissauer, however, caught up in the grip of stormy emotion, threw caution to the winds. It was her intention to find the Congregation, wait till Hazeltine emerged and then, showing no mercy whatever, whip and lash him into a bloody pulp.

This she would certainly have done, cheered on by a happily drooling membership of the Crime Writers Association, until she actually came face to face with him. She had seen photographs of him, but had never seen him in three-dimensional proximity.

The sight of his lovely face changed everything for her. Throwing away her horsewhip, she collapsed in tears. I might have mentioned that Ms. Lissauer had the same heavenly beauty that Hazeltine had, except that her hair was russet, and her eyes a heavenly brown. Her nose was tip-tilted, her lips bee-stung, her complexion a delicate peach and, to be as brief as possible, the two fell instantly in love.

I met Hazeltine not long afterward. We were good friends, partly because, as a critic, hardly anyone would speak to him, and he was always grateful to me that I consented to do so. —But then, you know me, old man. Hazeltine was generous with his luncheon hospitalities and I am the kind of person who is a true democrat. I will accept refreshments from any hands, however lowly.

"Lucius," I said, "congratulations. I hear that you have won the heart of the loveliest writer in all the world."

"Yes, I have," he said, with an oddly strained expression, "and she has won the heart of the loveliest critic in all the world—myself. It is, however, an ill-fated love. It can never be, George."

"Why not?" I said, puzzled.

"She is a writer. I am a critic. How, then, may we love?"

"Why, the usual way. Having obtained a motel room with a comfortable bed, you—"

"I am not speaking of the physical manifestations of love, George, but of the inner and spiritual beauty. You might as well expect oil and water to mix, fire and sand to coexist, dolphins to cohabit with deer, as to expect writers and critics to love. Could I refrain from reviewing her books?"

"Of course you can, Lucius. Just ignore them."

"No. Having reviewed *Wash Your Hands in My Blood* I have established reviewing rights, and I must review all her future books including

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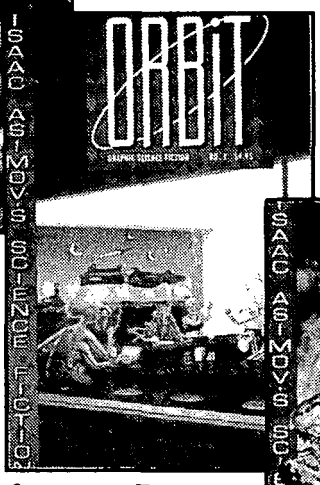

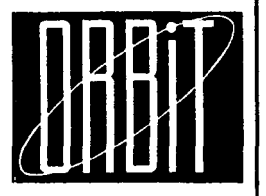

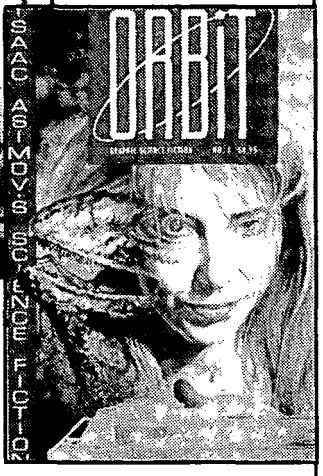

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the one she is now writing, a tender tale to be entitled *Hang Me Up By My Intestines*."

"Well, then, if you do review, say something nice. Emphasize the nausea and disgust."

Hazeltine looked at me with loathing. "How can I do that, George? You forget the Critic's Oath as established in ancient Greek times. Translated into English it reads: 'Though the subject is divine, and the outlook wide and vasty, Put starch into your spine, and utter something nasty.' I cannot break that oath, George, though it destroys my love and tears me apart."

I went to see Ms. Lissauer. I did not know her, but I introduced myself as a close friend of Lucius Lamar Hazeltine. That, combined with my air of stately dignity, worked wonders, and in no time she was bedewing my shirt with her tears.

"I love him; I love him," she said, finding a dry spot on my sleeve with which to wipe her eyes.

I said, "Then why not try to write something he would like?"

"How can I?" she said, eyeing me with loathing. "I could not break the writers' oath."

"There's a writer's oath?"

"It goes back to the ancient Sumerian. Translated into English it states: 'Be always keen and analytic, with the back of your hand to every critic.' "

My heart bled for these two sundered people and I felt that I had to turn to Azazel, whom I proceeded to call from the high-technology continuum in which he lives.

For a wonder, he was in a good mood. His little red face, with its nubbins of horns, smiled at me, and his inch-long tail wobbled to and fro.

"Oh, Wonder of the Cosmos," I said, "You seem happy."

"Indeed, I am," he said, "I have written a zyltchik which has been greeted with universal approbation."

"What is a zyltchik?"

"A witticism. All have laughed. It is a great triumph for me."

"Would that I could report triumphs for two young hearts that are steadily breaking. But, obviously, since your zyltchik met with universal approbation, there are no such things as critics on your world."

"Are there not?" said Azazel, in sudden indignation. "There you reveal your puny ignorance. We have these fossil remnants of Hades among us. It was only last week, in discussing another zyltchik I had perpetrated—I mean, composed—that a critic said, 'Horsabelum desoderatim andeviduali stinko.' Can you credit the ignorance and vile personality of anyone who would say that?"

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"What does it mean in English?"

"I wouldn't sully my lips to explain."

He was becoming furious and I could see his willingness to cooperate beginning to disappear, so I hastened to put the situation before him.

He listened closely, and said, "You have this critic and you want me to ameliorate his behavior."

"Yes."

"Impossible. Even I could not do that. A critic is beyond all help, at any level of technology."

"Could you in some way, then, manage to make him something other than a critic?"

"Again impossible. Surely you understand that a critic is totally unable to succeed at any other line of endeavor. If he had a trace of talent at anything, would he choose to be a critic?"

"There is something to that," I said, rubbing my chin.

"However," said Azazel, "let me think. There is a second person involved. A writer."

"Yes," I said, with sudden enthusiasm. "Could you manage to make her write something bland enough to avoid criticism?"

"You know that's impossible. Nothing is so bland, or, for that matter, so good, that a critic will refrain from tearing it to shreds. Where else lies the point of criticism? However—"

"However," I said, tensely.

"If I can't change a critic and can't change a writer, either by itself, I can change the two together. That is—I can turn the critic into a writer and the writer into a critic, by making use of the Law of Professional Conservation, and perhaps each one, having experienced the other side of the fence, so to speak, may then approach each other with newer eyes."

"Wonderful," I said. "I think you have the solution, O Master of the Infinite."

About a week later, I went to see Lucius Hazeltine and, sure enough, the virus was working.

He heaved a sigh in my direction and said, "I have grown tired of being a critic, George. The social obloquy that meets me on all sides; the hatred; the scorn and contumely, wearies me. Even the keen ecstasy of finding new ways of being unfairly nasty and vile in my estimates of literature no longer makes up for it."

"But what will you do instead?" I asked, anxiously.

"I will be a writer."

"But, Lucius, you can't write. You can stumble through critical invective, but that's about all."

"I will write poetry. That's easy."

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"Are you sure?"

"Of course. You bung in a rhyme or two and count the feet and if it's modern poetry, it doesn't even have to make sense. For instance, here is a morceau I have just tossed off. I call it 'The Vulture.' It goes:

He clasps the crag with crooked claws;
Close to the Sun without a pause,
Ringed with the azure world because
He watches for prey from mountain sides,
Then down like a thunderbolt he glides."

I said, thoughtfully, "Lucius, that sounds derivative."

"Derivative? What do you mean?"

"There's a poem entitled 'The Eagle' that starts with 'He clasps the crag with crooked hands.' "

Hazeltine glared. "An eagle? With hands? Anyone knows an eagle doesn't have hands. To be ignorant of so elementary a fact of natural history must make the poet a fool of no common size. Who wrote that poem you mention?"

"It was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, actually."

"Never heard of him," said Hazeltine. (He undoubtedly never had, for, after all, he had been a literary critic.)

"Let me read you some additional pieces," he said. He intoned:

"Listen, my children, and you will find
That I'll tell you a story, if you don't mind,
About the Land of the Rising Sun
On the Seventh of December, forty-one,
Almost all who remember are over and done—"

I interrupted. "What do you call this one, Lucius? The Daylight Snooze of Kimmel and Short?"

He stared at me narrowly. "How did you know?"

"A wild guess," I said.

He then went on to recite, "That's my last mother-in-law painted on the wall—", and "You know, we Yanks stormed Anzio, and on the trysting day—"

I had to stop him when he began what would clearly be a long, long ballad. It started:

"It was an ancient sailing man
And he stoppeth one of five.
'if you don't unhand me, graybeard loon,
You won't be long alive.' "

I staggered away. It wasn't as bad as being a critic, but it wasn't much better.

I went to see Ms. Lissauer. I found her in her study, drooping sadly over a manuscript.

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"I don't seem to be able to write any longer, George," she murmured softly. "The whole process no longer seems to grab me. My book *Hang Me Up By My Intestines* is doing well despite the cruel and vicious review of it by my beloved Lucius, but this new one palls. It is called *Skin Me to the Bone*, but I can't seem to put my heart into the skinning."

"But what are you going to do instead, Agatha?" I asked.

"I have decided to be a critic. I have sent in my curriculum vitae to the Critics Congregation, including documentary proof that I beat my aged grandmother and that I have stolen milk from babies on numerous occasions. I believe that will qualify me for the profession."

"I'm sure it will. And is it your intention to be a literary critic?"

"Not quite. I am, after all, a writer, and what does any writer know about literature? No, indeed, I am going to be a poetry critic."

"Poetry?"

"Of course. That's easy. The pieces are usually short so you don't get a headache reading them. And if they're modern you don't have to strain to understand them, because they're not supposed to have meaning of any kind. Naturally, I shall find a post with *Booksellers Weekly,* which publishes anonymous reviews. I am certain I can really fulfill myself if no one ever finds out who said the nasty things I plan to say."

"But, Agatha, you probably have not heard of this, but your beloved Lucius is no longer a critic. He is writing poetry."

"Wonderful," said Lissauer. "I will review his books."

"Gently, I hope," I said.

She eyed me with loathing. "Are you mad? And be fired from my post by *Booksellers Weekly*? Never."

I suppose you see the end.

Hazeltine's book of poetry was published under the title of *Fragrant Reminiscences* and was reviewed anonymously by Ms. Lissauer. This time it was Hazeltine who went about the livery stables, testing out horsewhips for the necessary springiness. He stormed the offices of *Booksellers Weekly* and before they could get in a squadron of police to remove him, he had found Ms. Lissauer cowering in a corner.

"Yes, yes," she said, "It was I who wrote the review."

Hazeltine threw away his horsewhip and burst into tears. As they dragged him off, he said, "She well deserves a lashing but I could not bring myself to raise welts on that glorious skin."

But it is still the same. Despite the changeover, they are still critic and writer and their love, which is as deep and as passionate as ever, must remain forever unfulfilled.

I had listened closely to the story and, when it was done, I said, "Let

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me get this straight, George. Lucius Lamar Hazeltine, who had been a literary critic, is still suffering, is he?"

"He is suffering the agonies of the damned."

"Wonderful. And Agatha Dorothy Lissauer, who became a critic, is also still suffering, is she not?"

"If anything, more than Hazeltine is."

"And they will continue to suffer forever?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well," I said, "no one can ever say that I am a vicious person or that I hold grudges. All who know me speak favorably of my sunny disposition and my ability to forgive and forget. But I do make some exceptions. George, for once you don't have to ask me for anything. Here is twenty dollars. If Azazel has any use for Earthly money, give him half." ●

PRIVATE GRAVITY

Linked,
we circle
one another.

Triggered
by internally generated forces
our gravity grows strong

and turns to time:
loose memories pressed together
become weight

which fuels this swing of spheres
through empty space. Thoughts

long trapped by coldsleep
are roused by unavoidable programs.
Fueled by new proximity
they flare to life inside us

and we circle, unable to halt,
pulled by private gravity
into the heart
of singularity.

—Kathleen Ann Goonan

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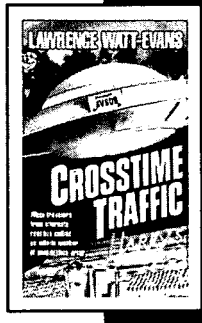

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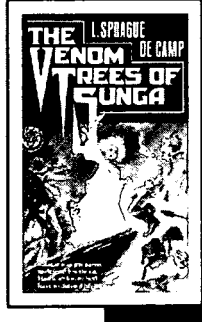

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GYPSY TRADE

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It is easier to hold an eel than a Gypsy.
—Spanish proverb

13 Oct. 1591

Dieter entered the sixteenth century carrying a 7.65mm pistol, a flat ugly Walther PPK semiautomatic. He hated to show distrustful karma, but 1591 was not a good year, and Dieter was badly out of costume. He was dressed in the uniform of a Waffen SS officer, complete with peaked cap, swastikas, lightning flashes on his collar tab, and an Iron Cross at his throat. Papers in his tunic pocket identified Dieter as Lieutenant-Colonel Walter Harzer, commander of the 9th SS Panzer "Hohenstaufen" division. The papers meant nothing in 1591, but the uniform was odd enough to attract attention. This late in the sixteenth century, it did not pay to look odd, or out of place.

Dieter glanced about. Nothing. Just the cold flat field, drear and empty under gloomy skies. In some centuries, the field was a swamp; in others, it was drained pasture, or meadow. Right now, it was dyked and level ploughland—flat as Dutch farming could make it.

Ruefully, he holstered the Walther. No sense being overly dramatic.

It was dusk. He had arrived facing west. Twilight silhouetted the dark mass of the Groesbeek heights. Kneeling down, he discovered that his jackboots had scattered the cards. Feeling carefully about, he found each one, counting them, wrapping them in their square of black silk. He slipped the pack into his rucksack. Without the cards, he would be stuck in the sixteenth century, a period whose most popular contributions to Western culture were syphilis and the artillery shell.

Shouldering the heavy rucksack, Dieter took a deep breath, sniffing smoke from a Gypsy fire. He could always count on Gypsies using the field. Sometimes a single wagon, or a tiny *karawan*. Sometimes a great Romany carnival. But always, even in the worst of times, there were Gypsies about.

He set out upwind, guided by the smoke. Goats bleated. Someone strummed a guitar. A small fire cast dancing shadows on gaily striped tents and a painted wagon sheltering under the first trees of the Reichswald—the dense black wood that straddles the border between Spanish Flanders and the Duchy of Cleves. A good spot. Dieter approved—silver *reales* from Flanders could be traded for cattle lifted in Cleves. Borders were great gifts to people who never obeyed them.

Raucous children played around the fire, like a flock of unkept birds, plaguing an old Jew in a black coat and broad brimmed hat—laughing, capering, yanking at his beard and earlocks. The Jew merely tried to keep warm and fend off the children.

Dieter sat down beside the Jew, dropping his rucksack. It rang against the ground. He waved at the children. "*Bassak*. Enough. Stop bothering. Bring us food. Wine, if you have it." He started counting to show he was serious, "*Jek, duoi, tren, shtar . . .*" Children are the tyrants of a Gypsy camp.

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Startled to hear a stranger using the *Calo*, dirty urchins disappeared into the tents and painted wagon. Older siblings came out of the tents to look him over. Girls in wide embroidered skirts grinned at him, showing off glistening teeth, intrigued by his strange uniform and familiar manner. Dexterous boys gauged the weight of his rucksack. Dieter grinned back, glad to be home. He had never been to this part of the sixteenth century before, but for a Gypsy, home is hardly ever a place, or a time—it is a people, a life, the *Calo*.

The Jew began to pour out his troubles in Yiddish and German; he was Isaac ben Jacob, a native of *Den Haag*, trying to get home through the Spanish lines. Half starved, he had no money. *"Kein gelt."*

Dieter half believed him. Isaac ben Jacob of *Den Haag* did not say what brought him to Catholic Cleves in the first place. Yet everyone had secrets worth keeping; Dieter certainly did. And small lies flow naturally around a Gypsy fire. "You're in luck." Dieter nodded at the barely visible heights. "Nijmegen is not far off." It amused him to be giving directions so soon after arriving. "In two days, Maurice of Nassau will be here to take Nijmegen from the Spanish. When he does, you may walk across the Waal bridge into Holland." He waved toward the tents and wagons. "I'll tell these people to feed you until then."

Astounded and pleased, Isaac thanked him generously, not the least put off by the Nazi uniform. All that lay in the future.

Dieter shrugged. "I can take no credit. Thank Maurice of Nassau when he arrives."

The guitar started up again. Bolder girls began to dance, giggling at Dieter over bared shoulders, twirling colored sashes and kerchiefs, showing dirty feet beneath swirling skirts. Bells on their ankles rang in time to the strumming. Dieter watched, knowing he would get nowhere with these girls. This dance was pure distraction. He sat and admired, keeping a jackboot firmly planted on his rucksack strap—a negligent attitude toward one's possessions invites theft.

A black-bearded giant, wearing knee-breeches and a bright sleeveless coat, descended from the wagon. He had gold hoop earings, oiled lovelocks, and a yellow silk bandana. Very Gypsy. Jabbering children steered him over to Dieter.

"San tu Rom?" The man sounded suspicious. "Are you Gypsy?"

"Da tchte san, pralo. Yes I am, brother," Dieter replied.

"You don't look it."

Dieter spread his hands apologetically. He had dark curly hair, but his skin was fair, his features very Aryan. Dyed blond, he could have posed for a Wehrmacht recruiting poster. Nor was his SS uniform very Gypsy. But the *Calo* was his best proof. Romany was an impossible mix of Sanskrit, Macedonian Greek, Persian, Armenian, Rumanian, and a half-dozen other tongues. No one but Basques and Gypsies spoke the *Calo* fluently. Not in 1591.

"What does the wandering Jew want?"

Dieter shrugged. "What does any man want? To eat. To walk the earth,

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to not lie under it." He winked at the big man. "*Piavta.* Let's drink. Feed my friend Isaac out here. We have business inside. Gypsy business."

Black eyes narrowed.

"Da." Dieter nodded. "I am the one."

"Da. Piavta." The caravan leader produced a wineskin and shouted orders to the children. "I am called Bratu. Come meet my woman."

Mounting three short steps, Dieter doffed his muddy jackboots at the entrance to the wagon. Children jostled by him, shrieking with delight, carrying half a boiled chicken and a big three-pound loaf of *pan de munición*, the wheat and rye bread issued to the Army of Flanders. He heard them taunt Isaac, calling the bread ham and the chicken piglet. The insults were in Romany, so Dieter doubted that the hungry man minded overmuch.

Bratu drew aside the braided rug that served as a door. A single brass lamp cast dark shadows over brightly woven colors. An empty cushion was set out for Dieter, just inside the entrance. Bratu's woman, Draga, sat crosslegged facing the cushion, wearing a flounced skirt and embroidered jacket. She had full hips, a narrow waist, and a hatchet face. Her wrinkled eyes were old and knowledgeable—her clear intense scrutiny reminding Dieter of a queen's sculpted head he had seen in the Cairo Museum. As he sat down, she asked, "Are you the one?" staring suspiciously at his Nazi uniform. "You are very fair."

"Yes, I am fair."

"And oddly dressed." She did not like the dark SS tunic.

Dieter shrugged. "I come from far away."

"And young," she added.

Dieter nodded. He had known women like Draga all his life. Powerful, intense, worldly-wise. Wealthy and open-handed enough to serve meat to a strange Jew—but closefisted with her secrets, cool as a tigress if she distrusted you. The grandmother who had trained Dieter was so much like Draga that they had to be related. Which made Draga his ancestor too. "I am from a time and place where Gypsies come in all colors, and camp where we wish."

"Da, da." Draga was unimpressed. "And gold *escudos* grow on trees. Save your stories, pretty boy—use them on the young and foolish."

Bratu closed the flap behind him. "Dark, fair; young, old. What's the difference? So long as he gets it done."

Draga made the sign for silence. "Three women have been taken from us, locked behind stone. . . ."

"Maybe tortured too," muttered Bratu.

Draga hissed.

"Where?" asked Dieter.

"Where were they seized? Or where are they kept?"

"Both." Dieter needed details to work his magic.

"They were taken by *genitors*, at the crossroads below the Groesbeek. The Spaniard in Nijmegen has them." Draga spat.

"He won't bring them out except to burn them," added Bratu.

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"What Spaniard? What is his name?"

Draga and Bratu looked at each other. "Ask the Jew," Draga decided. "A Jew would know."

They brought Isaac in, and Dieter asked him.

Isaac pulled at his long straggling beard, looking from Gypsy to Gypsy. "The Spanish commander in Nijmegen is Colonel Mendoza de la Coruna, a nervous *gallego*. He buys art. But he may not have your women. There is a young witch-hunter hereabouts, a Jesuit named del Rio." Isaac ben Jacob had not been just blundering about after all—he at least knew who stood between him and safety.

"We'll start with Mendoza." Dieter hoped that he didn't need to deal with del Rio—"Jesuit Witch Hunter" didn't sound inviting. "Who are the women?"

"My wife's mother, Marga." Bratu spoke without looking at Draga.

"And my Aunt Gan," Draga added.

"Those are the main ones." Bratu took a swallow from the wineskin. "The third is a cousin. Tinka. Young, not so important. You know the type. All tits, always in trouble. . . ."

"It is better to be all *prick*, and pigheaded?" Draga waved three fingers at Dieter. "They have lost three women. We want three women back, *tren*."

"Tren," Dieter nodded. He would not think of leaving Tinka. Tinka was already essential to the pattern. "I will do what I can do. But I need a nice-looking horse—not a cart pony. A gentleman's horse."

Bratu smiled, "I know where such a one can be stolen."

At dawn the next day, Dieter rode up to Nijmegen on a gorgeous chestnut mare, whose only defect was that she kept turning her head, trying to take the road back to her stall in Cleves. He presented himself as Colonel Walter Harzer of the Holy Roman Reich, bearing crucial dispatches for Colonel Mendoza de la Coruna. Waiting by a high postern gate, he studied the solid *trace italienne* bastions and deep ditches. It was a wet gray morning. Below the fortress, he could see the stone bridge, and the big sweeping S curve made by the Waal.

An English ensign wearing a Neville badge and the Cross of Saint Andrew led him to Mendoza's quarters; the Army of Flanders was not just Spanish and Flemish—Italians, Burgundians, Austrians, Germans, even Scots and Irish served in its *tercios*. A United Nations in miniature faced Maurice of Nassau. Colonel Mendoza was dark and pensive, with deeply solemn eyes, a trim beard, and the bearing of a professional soldier. Looking more Gypsy than Dieter did, the Spaniard spoke corrupt Dutch-German with a Latin accent. His oak-paneled quarters were decorated with block prints and engravings. Dieter noted a woodcut matching one he had seen in Berlin. "Is that a Dürer?" He praised the active composition and vivid classical lines.

Mendoza preened, offering his guest steamed chocolate. "I bought it in Antwerp. He is still quite popular there."

The Spaniard sipped his own chocolate, looking dubiously at Dieter's

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Nazi *ausweis*, SS identity card, and papers stamped with the Sword and H insignia of the Hohenstaufen Division. Dieter hastened to explain. "The 'Colonel' is strictly honorary. I am on detached service from the Reich."

Mendoza nodded. Germany was currently awash with free-captains, condottiere, and military contractors—fighting for all sides and for themselves. "So we are only speaking colonel to colonel?"

"Exactly." Dieter bet that he could best appeal to Mendoza as a soldier. "Colonel to colonel, I can tell you that Maurice of Nassau will be here before breakfast tomorrow, bringing enough cannon to batter his way into Nijmegen."

Mendoza set down his chocolate, not nearly as pleased by this news as Isaac ben Jacob had been. "Maurice of Nassau is before Antwerp. He took Hulst only a month ago."

"He has loaded his army back onto boats and barges. The cannon that took Hulst are headed here." Dieter enjoyed wielding the truth. A single truth well-told did the work of a dozen lies.

"He could do it," Mendoza admitted. The Army of Flanders tried to keep Maurice pinned in the low flat Heart of Holland, between the forks of the Rhine and the sea. But interior lines and command of the rivers let the Dutch move about at will. "Do you expect a reward for telling me this?" Mendoza eyed him cautiously. The warning was not worth much—alone and isolated, Nijmegen was the last Spanish stronghold in Gelderland. Mendoza was at Maurice's mercy, if the Dutch decided to act.

"No. The *warning* is free. I expect to be paid for saving your *city*. With my help, you can beat Maurice of Nassau. Without me, you won't last the week."

"Silver *reales* for saving Nijmegen?"

"Gold *escudos*—two or three hundred—I'm hardly greedy. And three women you are holding."

"Ah, of course. *Las Gitanas*." The Spaniard lifted an eyebrow. "It becomes clear. You do not look *Gitano*."

"How else would I know what will happen tomorrow?"

"How else?" Mendoza sipped his chocolate and considered. "You understand, these women are being held for Father del Rio. I am merely a jailor."

Mendoza seemed embarrassed. Dieter detected a northerner's distaste for the clergy. Good, he could use that. "On what charge?"

"Witchcraft."

Dieter had guessed as much, but it was still terrible to hear. There was no legal defense against the charge—torture guaranteed conviction and execution. To the south, in Trier, judges who refused to send victims to the flames were themselves burnt. Flanders was only beginning to ignite. He tried to sound unconcerned. "As their jailor, you need to look in on them. Let me see that they are alive, and I will show you how to save Nijmegen from the heretic."

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Mendoza nodded; to visit the cell cost him nothing. The Spaniard seemed sufficiently skeptical, but Dieter planned to be utterly convincing.

Gypsies say that every jailor serves a life sentence—Dieter never felt that more strongly than when he was in a dungeon. He followed Mendoza down stone steps into a dank hole, reeking of mold and urine. The women were huddled in a single cell. Mendoza held a scented handkerchief over his nose, trying to hurry Dieter through, but Dieter insisted on taking a lamp right up to the bars.

The cell was dirty and smelled of diarrhea, making Dieter want to gag. Draga's mother Marga looked frail and limp. Her sister Gan was more robust—hawk-faced, steel-haired. Tinka, the busty young cousin, did not strike Dieter as a trouble-maker, just scared and woebegone. Leaning against Tinka was a Dutch or German woman, young, blonde, blue-eyed, looking harried and exhausted.

He whispered in Romany, "The cards have sent me. Tomorrow you sleep under the stars."

Even the blonde's eyes went wide, seeing her cellmates' reaction. She could not know what was said, but Dieter saw her trying to guess if *she* was included in the good news.

"San tu Rom?" Draga's mother demanded.

Mendoza coughed behind him. Dieter nodded. "Tomorrow night." Staring straight at him, the blonde woman managed a weak smile.

Back in the sunlight, the Spaniard tucked his handkerchief into his sleeve. "I am hardly happy with this. At home, Jesuits do not hunt *Gitanas*. But here in Flanders, they take the new Witch Decree seriously. *Too* seriously, some would say. You have met Father del Rio? No? Ah, then you have that delight ahead of you."

An interview with del Rio was now inevitable; Dieter had shown an interest in the prisoners, enough to make him suspect. Witchcraft was a highly contagious crime. "First I want to show you what is at stake." Dieter aimed to convince Mendoza, colonel to colonel, before meeting del Rio. "Do you have a firing range?"

"Nothing fancy. I will show you the midden heap the musketeers use as a butt." Dieter declared that that would do splendidly. The Spaniard led him to a stone court separating the fortress kitchen from the stables. It stank even by sixteenth-century standards. Dieter collected some broken pots and chipped plates, standing them upright in the midden. Crockery made spectacular targets. Opening his rucksack, he took out a black angular submachine gun. It was a factory fresh Wehrmacht MP40, 9 millimeter, the replacement for the older semi-automatic MP38. Dropping to one knee, Dieter fit the folding stock to his shoulder.

He took aim and squeezed off a couple of dozen shots. For the time it takes to count to twelve slowly, the gun banged like a metronome gone mad, two beats to the second, shattering every target.

"Mother of God!" Mendoza was awestruck by such offhanded destruction. "Where was that pistol made?"

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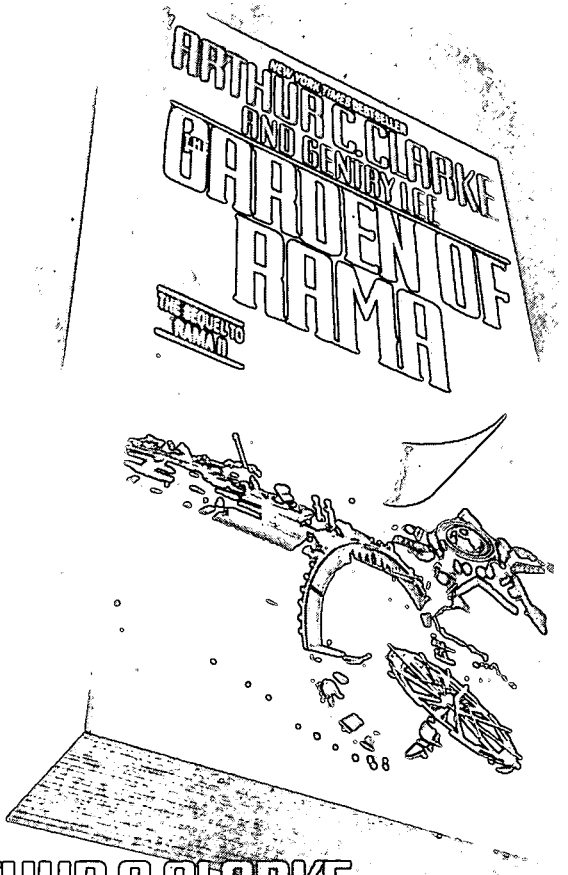

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"In Germany." Dieter traded the gun for a fresh one from the rucksack, one with a full clip. Soldiers, cooks, and harlots, drawn by the noisy demonstration, stood in hushed silence.

"Why have I seen nothing like it?" Mendoza demanded.

"A military secret. Watch this." Setting the second gun on full automatic, Dieter held down the trigger, blasting off an entire 32-round clip in a deafening burst of sound. Manure, offal, and ceramic chips flew wildly about. The torrent of gunfire lasted less than four seconds. Terrified gasps, then an enthusiastic cheer came from the shaken spectators. Nothing remained of the original plates.

Dieter handed the empty gun to Mendoza, who hefted it gingerly. "It weighs less than an arquebus!"

"And fires five hundred times as fast. A man with one of these is more than equal to a company of musketeers."

"How many do you have?"

"Enough. I will trade you a half-dozen of these guns for the three Gypsy women in your dungeon. And Nijmegen is saved for the faith."

"Ave Maria." Mendoza turned the weapon over in his hand. "You must meet the good Padre del Rio." Whether or not Maurice's army arrived on the morrow, Mendoza wanted to know more about automatic weapons.

The witch hunter was staying in a fortified manor, an increasingly popular type of residence in sixteenth century Flanders—for those who could afford one. The *schloss* sat like a small castle on a wooded spur, halfway between Nijmegen and the Groesbeek. Tower windows looked out over the treetops, towards Nijmegen and the Waal. Riding up the heights, Dieter explained in a general way the workings of a submachine gun. Mendoza was able to grasp the basic principle of a gas-operated gun, and how the blowback mechanism worked, but he remained thoroughly amazed.

Grooms took their horses. The castellan ushered them into a stone-vaulted library, where del Rio was going over Greek translations. The young priest was barely out of his teens, with a bookish pallor and big eyes that made him look even younger. He sat at a wheeled desk, a combination writing-table and tricycle, allowing him to scoot from one folio volume to another as they talked. Mendoza had warned Dieter that del Rio was a sort of prodigy, a Renaissance priest, accustomed to doing several things at once. "He never stops working, knows nine languages and a thousand authors. Published an edition of Seneca while still in his teens. Devoted to the Virgin. Very pure."

Dieter could well believe it. Especially the last part. Del Rio looked like he had never made love to a woman, or a man either, for that matter. The idea of this weirdly arrested adolescent ordering up tortures and passing judgment on Marga, Gan, and Tinka made Dieter's asshairs curl. He listened as Mendoza elaborated on the menace presented by Maurice of Nassau and their precarious military situation. The Spaniard concluded, "Colonel Harzer has brought strategic information vital to the

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defense of Nijmegen. In return, he wishes to relieve us of certain prisoners, whose security I can no longer guarantee, given . . ."

"Do you mean the witches?" The young scholar stopped wheeling between volumes of Plato.

"*Sí,*" admitted Mendoza. "The *suspected* witches."

"There is no suspicion." The boy's eyes bulged in an unhealthy fashion. "Three of them were taken with witch's paraphernalia—cards, crystals, dried herbs, and a goat. Their guilt is obvious. The other comes from a notorious nest of witches in Trier. Her whole village was infected, and had to be burnt down to the roots." Dieter remembered the blonde German girl in the cell, with the searching blue eyes.

"She was convicted of witchcraft and condemned to death six years ago," del Rio informed them. "But the Prince-Bishop merely had her flogged before her parents' fire. A misguided show of pity toward a witch child. Now she is of age. She escaped from Trier, but she shall not escape the flames."

Colonel Mendoza objected that Maurice of Nassau might appear with an entire *army* of heretics. "By all means, burn the German girl—since she has had her trial. But give me *las Gitanas.*"

"You have guns. You have men." Del Rio gripped the tricycle desk. "Would you save Nijmegen from heresy by giving in to *witchcraft?* Beware, Mendoza! There is the smell of deviltry about this dark-garbed man!" He wagged a finger at Dieter's SS tunic. "Across the border in Cleves, accomplices of Satan pose as Catholics. Patronizing heretics. Preaching toleration. Do not fall into that pit."

Dieter thought of the Walther in its saddle leather holster. The trigger pull was feather-light. Three-fifths of a second to draw and fire. He had practiced the movement. By putting a 7.65 mm bullet in this boy's forehead, Dieter would be doing the sixteenth century an immense favor. But he would have to shoot Mendoza, too—a real pity there. Then what? Killing Mendoza and del Rio would not get Marga, Gan, and Tinka out of their cell. And it would not be very Gypsy.

"Burn them *all,*" the boy declared, "let Satan take the guilty. God will greet the innocent."

Mendoza protested, "By that logic, *everyone* is better off burnt."

The stunted boy smiled. "Perhaps. But pity is a snare, and leniency is a sin." He lifted a pasty finger. "*Yet,* be merciful! If any of these women truly and wholeheartedly confesses, if she repudiates her crimes and shows real repentance—*strangle* her first." Throttling was the most common anesthetic administered to witches at the stake. He returned to reading Plato.

Mendoza rolled his eyes and showed Dieter to the door.

They stayed up half the night, drinking Spanish brandy and admiring the colonel's woodcuts, while Mendoza blasted the vicious stupidity of the clergy as only a Spaniard can. "Our padres are as damnable as the Dutch! Swindling drunkards, extorting money from the dying, selling

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amputated limbs as saint's relics. I know a company chaplain with a stable of fine horses *and* a strapping young son!"

"A most enterprising cleric." Dieter far preferred horse-fancying womanizers to sadistic eunuchs like del Rio.

"As for our Flemish bishops, I was never blessed by one without feeling the need of a bath." Mendoza gave Dieter a dubious glance, "You know, I do not look forward to a Dutch attack. But if nothing happens *mañana*, if you are merely some mad doomsayer, imagine my embarrassment."

"Imagine *mine*." Dieter poured himself another brandy. "We shall know by breakfast tomorrow."

Next morning, Maurice of Nassau arrived, erasing Mendoza's doubts. Little Dutch battalions and big siege guns landed from boats and barges, moving like disciplined clockwork toys. Dieter was pleased. Timing was never a certain thing in the sixteenth century—calendars were being reshuffled, chroniclers were corrupt or inept. Mendoza glared from the ramparts, alarmed and hungover. "The Dutch are such *energetic* demons—it is a headache just to watch them work!"

Dieter offered him a pair of aspirin. "Take these—they thin the blood. We must do business now, before they blockade the town." With the Dutch still scrambling out of their boats, this was the moment to bargain.

Mendoza swallowed the aspirin. "You swear there is no deviltry in your guns."

"No more than in a musket. By the Blessed Saints and the Holy Virgin, I am no demon, just a *Gitano*, and a sometimes Catholic. But *hurry*," he insisted. "Maurice will waste not a moment. He plans to blast holes in your enceinte, then throw in his infantry. With my guns, you can hold any breach, slaughtering the infidels as they come on." Dieter warmed to his sales pitch.

"Enough," Mendoza held up his hand. "It is far too early in the morning to talk of slaughter. I will pay you right out of the company chests." Each captain had a chest, or *caja*, used to advance money during the long periods when regular pay was in arrears. A few hundred *escudos* was nothing, really, not with Nijmegen at stake.

"And I want the woodcut. The Dürer."

"The Dürer?" Mendoza looked as shocked as when Dieter had first fired the machine-gun.

"Give it to me, or give it to the Dutch."

"Done," Mendoza agreed, "before you want my hose and doublet as well! Six guns. For the Dürer, the gold, and three women."

"Four women." Dieter pictured knowing blue eyes. If he left the young German woman for del Rio to burn, her gaze would haunt him from century to century. "The German too. The one from Trier." Mendoza grimaced at what the boy Jesuit would say—but, in the midst of stark calamity, what was one woman more or less?

"Tren." Draga held up three fingers in the shadowy lamplight of her wagon, glaring at Dieter. "I said *three* women, and you return with *four*!

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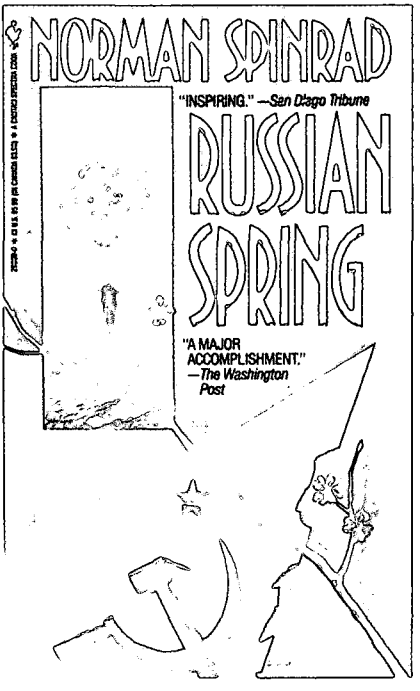
"Inspiring.



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You can't send a man to do the simplest task, without him coming back drunk. Or in love."

"I am not in love." Sitting crosslegged on a cushion, Dieter defended his decision.

"Then you are drunk."

"I just could not leave her." This was the bare truth.

"You were not there, Draga," Mother Marga lay in the back of the wagon, tended by Gan and Tinka. Wretched food and prison water had given her a violent fever. "You would have done the same." Gan and Tinka agreed.

"But what will we *do* with her?" Draga was not going to be silenced, even by her mother—not in her own wagon. "She is not Gypsy. How will we hide a pretty blonde fugitive? The first people to spot her will think that we stole her. And that *he* is fucking her." She nodded toward Bratu. "And they will be right, because my man *also* thinks with his pecker."

"Shave her head," suggested Bratu. "Make her ugly. It is all the same to me."

"Pig!" She spat in his lap. "So what do we say when the *genitors* come for us? All is well, kind sirs—she is only a witch?"

"I will take her with me." Dieter had expected this.

"Indeed, you will!"

"I can take her to a place where witches are not hunted."

"And Gypsies roam free." Draga snorted. "Just try not to promise her true love and a pot of gold. Then when you leave her somewhere far away, she won't be so shocked."

The blonde woman had been sitting by the entrance flap the whole time, wide-eyed, watching the conversation. Without knowing the *Calo*, Dieter could see that she could still tell what was being said. The sharp-faced woman did not want her here. The men were going to give in to her.

Dieter settled down beside her. He smiled. By now, he knew that her name was Kathe, and that she had no one. Her parents, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts had all been burnt. The family she had been staying with in Flanders had been scared senseless by her arrest.

"These people," Dieter indicated Draga's clan, "can take you only as far as Cleves." Cleves was a haven of sorts. Gypsies and witches were not tolerated there, but they were not hunted, either. Yet safety there was tenuous. The Erasmian Duke of Cleves was old and childless. When he died, the duchy would go to whoever was strong enough to take it.

"The Dutch will soon have Nijmegen," Dieter added, explaining that Mendoza was doomed. "The normal unit of fire for a submachine gun is 1800 rounds. I brought only enough shells for each gun to be test-fired—not enough to bother Maurice of Nassau." Dieter shrugged apologetically. "A Spaniard should have known not to trust a *Gitano*." It was the true Gypsy genius to find people with more than they needed, then get it from them for free.

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Dieter went on, "I do not know if Maurice of Nassau burns witches. I do know he means to be Prince of all Holland. At Hulst, he shot the first soldier who mistreated a woman."

She stared calmly back at him, seemingly unruffled by his strange talk. Six years of horror and hiding seemed to have toughened her immeasurably. "But I am neither Dutch, nor a reformer." She appeared to have thought this out. Maurice of Nassau was at best an unknown quantity, at worst a bigoted tyrant and Protestant fanatic. Kathe seemed to be more concerned, sensibly enough, with the man in front of her.

Dieter nodded. "I can take you to where you will be safe. But the haven is far away. You must start a new life in a foreign land, a time and place that are incredibly different. Do you understand?"

She looked directly at Dieter. It was easy for him to guess what she must be thinking: This man has saved my life. Why? Does he want me? He is clearly a warlock, steeped in dangerous magic. Is he also a demon in human form? She studied every detail of his SS uniform, examining the lightning slashes, black crosses, and birds of prey, worry-lines crinkling around her eyes. Only the swastika seemed to reassure her—the crooked cross was an ancient symbol of well-being. She shook her head, "No, I do not understand."

"How could you?" Dieter agreed. "Will you come anyway?"

"Yes." Clearly, she had no choice. The Gypsies did not want her. Dieter had snatched her from the fire. Whatever he planned for her, it could hardly be worse than what del Rio intended.

They waited while Gypsies wrapped Mother Marga in a fur coverlet. Her fever was worse. Fire made her shiver. She complained that the night air felt hot. But the old woman was as determined as her daughter. She insisted on having her family carry her, leading Dieter and Kathe to a spot in the center of the field, under a great net of stars. There Marga asked to be put down, and patted the ground with her hand. "A good place to lay the cards."

Gan set down a brass lamp that might have belonged to Aladdin. Dieter took the square of black silk out of his rucksack. Inside was a Gypsy tarot deck. He handed them to Kathe. The cards felt cold and alive.

"What are you doing?" Draga demanded.

"Let her spread the cards." Dieter spoke softly. He was taking a risk—anger these women, and he was stuck in a thoroughly dismal century. "I am sure she has the Talent."

"So what if she *does?* She is not Gypsy!"

"But she is going with me. It will be better, safer, easier, if I have a woman with me who can spread the cards. I know the patterns, but . . ." He let the last word hang. Knowing the patterns was never enough, not if you were a man.

"You want too much." Draga shook her head. "I know what you think. You have got yourself a blonde witch. Scared. Thankful. Trusting. She will spread the cards for you, cook your meals, keep your bed warm—then

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you won't need tough old Gypsy women anymore. There are *reasons* why you men don't have the Talent. *Good* reasons."

"Be still, Draga," Mother Marga interrupted. "Be quiet. Be thankful." Marga sat wrapped in her coverlet, supported by Gan and Tinka. Her gray hair had come out in clumps, showing patches of scalp—her voice sounded ragged. "Dieter has done us a great service."

"I *am* thankful," Draga insisted. "But thankful is not *stupid*. Thankful is not throwing power at a man's feet!"

"When you are as old and as close to death as I am, you will care less about power, and more about balance, about *life*." Marga placed thin fingers on Kathe's wrist, then looked to Dieter. "Will you tell her exactly what I say?"

"Of course, Mother Marga."

"Tell her first to be brave, as brave as she was in the Spaniard's cell. Tell her that I am giving her a great gift, a power beyond imagining. Explain that you can teach her the patterns, but that you cannot lay the cards. Explain that *no* man can. Tell her that this is a Gypsy gift. Given in exchange for the kindness and trust she showed me in the cell—and because I am going to die. But tell her that no Gypsy gift comes free. If she uses it well, if she does right by the gift, Gypsies will *still* get the best of the bargain. Tell her all that."

Dieter told her.

Marga helped her lay out the cards. First the great circle that is the wheel of power. Then the pattern in the center that directs the power. When they were done, Marga said farewell.

Dieter shouldered his rucksack, and clasped hands with Kathe. They stepped together into the center of the circle.

And were gone.

Life without danger is as empty as life without love.
—Gypsy proverb

The Dutch School

Kathe stepped from a damp October night into blazing summer sunlight that smelled of new mown hay. Draga, Marga, Gan, and Tinka were replaced by yellowing wheat, lush green trees, and tall dykes—a Brueghel landscape, brimming with color. In the middle distance, a Dutch farmer stood beside a thatched barn, shading his eyes, trying to make out the two figures who had suddenly appeared in his field. Only Dieter remained the same, totally at ease with the astonishing transition. He gave her fingers a happy squeeze. "I *knew* you had the Talent. I could tell by your eyes." Letting go of her hands, he bent down to collect the cards.

She had done this? Kathe's mother had taught her cures, her aunts had cast spells, but *this* was raw supernatural power—none of the

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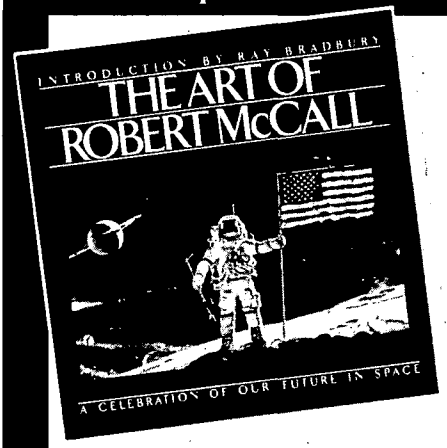

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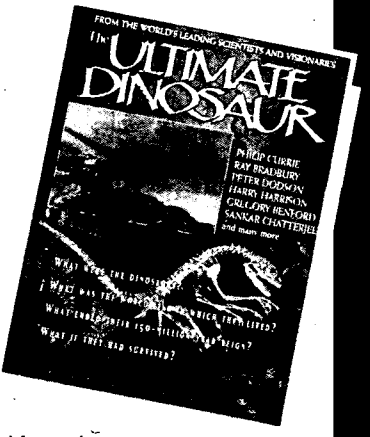

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doomed women in her family could have come close to matching this Gypsy magic. "I cannot really believe . . ."

"Oh, you did it, all right." Dieter straightened up, wrapping the cards in black silk. "I have tried the patterns. I imagine that every Gypsy boy does, hoping *he* will be the one, the man who has the Talent even though he is a man. To me, they are only cards." He handed her the deck, then looked about. "You have brought us to a very safe moment—a brand-new century. Nijmegen is now part of the Netherlands. There is a truce with Spain. No war. No witch hunts. Not for the moment." Wonder on top of wonder. He stared into the breeze blowing down from the Rhine—centuries passing over his face. "It won't last. It never does. All over Europe, nations are sharpening their sabres." Dieter had the true Gypsy contempt for governments, plunging their people into one holocaust after another, calling each new disaster leadership. Or statecraft. "The Thirty Years War is coming." Dieter smiled and shouldered his rucksack. "But we won't wait around for it."

He led her through the wheat and across the stubble, to where a small horde of Gypsies was camped under the trees, with their children, dogs, and wheeled caravans. A buxom matriarch in a carnival tent dress met them at the steps of her yellow-green wagon, throwing arms around Dieter, greeting him in Romany. She grabbed Kathe next, hugging her, calling her Kathe.

"What is she saying?" Kathe was astonished to hear her name used by this wild Gypsy woman.

"She's happy we've come. They've been waiting for us."

"But how does she know me?"

"All part of the pattern," Dieter answered airily, delighting in her mystification. The big woman dragged Kathe into her painted wagon. Gypsies brought out food, drink, and fiddles—a party erupted. Hustled from dungeon to daylight, and steered through two Gypsy camps, Kathe wanted only to sleep, but people pushed food at her, demanding in Romany that she eat and enjoy. Men were showing Dieter paintings—he bent forward, studying brush strokes and signatures, setting canvases aside.

"What's happening?"

"I visited here before, and gave them the names of artists whose work could be stolen or bought for next to nothing." Dieter showed her a pair of landscapes and a gentleman's portrait. "From Antwerp—the landscapes are student works by a young court painter; the portrait was done by a wife-beating sot. They are scandalized that I am paying good gold for them." She watched him count out some of Mendoza's coins, big heavy Spanish *escudos de a doce reales*. In ecstasy, Gypsies passed the gold about, admiring its weight and feel.

Kathe squinted at the paintings. The two landscapes were pretty, but the portrait was extraordinary, strikingly real. Yet each detail done with a touch of humor. She wanted to finger the lace on the man's cuffs.

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"The landscapes are early Rubens—not so rich, not so Italian. The portrait is by Frans Hals, priceless."

Kathe nodded wearily. "He looks ready to stroll off the canvas."

Dieter patted her hand. "You must be wrung out." Tired as she was, Kathe found his touch thrilling—this strange gallant Gypsy was the first man in a long time who was not hell-bent on mistreating her. Of course, that could change.

Dieter called out in Romany. The Gypsy matron grinned, leaped up and led Kathe to a couch in the back of the caravan, quickly and casually turning back the coverlet—Kathe guessed the woman was giving up her own bed. Burrowing under the bed clothes, Kathe motioned to Dieter. "Please thank her. I cannot believe how kind she has been."

He said something that made the big woman's breasts jiggle with amusement. "You really don't recognize her, do you?"

Kathe shook her head.

"This is your old cellmate, Tinka."

Kathe gave Tinka a weak smile. "Of course." Within the woman, Kathe could see vague outlines of the girl, her merry eyes and soft mouth, all half-hidden by folds of flesh—the teenager she had parted from last night was now a grandmother. *Decades* had passed in a flickering. Feeling immensely old herself, Kathe drifted into sleep.

She awoke the next morning remembering a dream. She had seen herself as a child, walking hand-in-hand with her mother and her youngest aunt, down a long muddy road. Each time they came to a puddle, the two women would swing the child into the air, saying, "Oopla." Then they would set her on her feet again. Kathe ran up to warn them about the burnings, but none of them knew her because she was a Gypsy. All Kathe could do was sob, begging them to be happy. "This is the best time of your lives!" she cried, feeling like one of those strange crazy women who cry over little girls. Before she could stop crying and collect herself, Kathe woke up.

Dieter was already at work, sewing a canvas and leather case to carry the rolled-up paintings. Tinka presented them with clean traveling clothes. Kathe got a peasant's dress with a tight bodice, turned-down collar, white apron, and gathered skirt. Dieter got some Dutchman's shirt and doublet, and stiff leather breeches. His Nazi uniform went to pad the paintings.

When it was time to be off, Dieter explained the pattern in detail, telling Kathe the significance of each card, having her try out different arrangements. She felt more confident, more in control—knowing what to expect. The result was the same. She stepped into the pattern, and half a century passed.

Her elation at controlling the patterns was tempered by aching emptiness. Tinka was now long dead. So was everyone Kathe had ever known, talked to, seen or heard of—except for Dieter. The Gypsies who greeted them were gruff and unfamiliar. To them, Dieter was not the eternally youthful hero he had been to Tinka's people. He was a kind of legacy

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whose coming had been long predicted, needing to be fed and sent on his way. Kathe got even less of a welcome. This band had been hunted out of Germany, where legal opinion on Gypsies was divided between traditionalists who favored flogging and hanging, and enlightened jurists who thought that flogging was inhumane, feeling that hanging *alone* would be enough to rid the Reich of human vermin.

Kathe felt that all she knew of the world now was Dieter and this Dutch field. He sensed her loss. "I warned you it would be hard. Look, for a while we will travel without the cards." The man was in perpetual motion, pure Gypsy, a moving target that might never stop, not even for her.

Walking, or riding in peasant carts, they passed through Nijmegen. Kathe saw a moderately prosperous Dutch town, built of stone and brick, with red-gray roofs, spires, chimneys, bridges and boats. Beyond the Waal bridge was the level expanse of farmland between the forks of the Rhine; a flat island in the land, green polder dotted with windmills and tiny clusters of houses—Lent, Elst, and Dreil. Kathe moved like a ghost through the low dyked landscape, seeing faces she assumed she would never see again. At Arnhem, Dieter booked passage on a barge to Rotterdam. From there, it was a short sail to Delft.

"Born in Delft, lived in Delft, died in Delft," Dieter recited. "The life of Jan Vermeer. He is a favorite of mine."

Kathe was awed by Vermeer's studio. Paintings glowed with pearly white light, like canvas windows into a luminous world where calm graceful women worked at solitary tasks; on the walls behind the women were miniature paintings-within-paintings, tiny portraits and landscapes done in vivid detail. Each canvas reminded Kathe of the magic that is in everyday life.

Vermeer's house was more like a Gypsy camp, overflowing with children. The painter was flattered that Dieter and Kathe had come some distance to see his work, saying that he thought he had no reputation beyond Delft, and a poor one even here. Vermeer had Kathe sit for a portrait sketch, showing her how he used a camera obscura to produce crystalline mirror-like images, capturing the many subtleties of reflected light. Dieter bought two paintings that no one in Delft had wanted.

They returned to Nijmegen by barge and canal boat. In the field, Dieter helped Kathe lay out a completely new pattern, all coins and cups, different by far from any he had shown her. They clasped hands, but instead of stepping into the pattern, they stood for a long time, hand in hand. The thrill of contact, the feel of flesh on flesh, was so strong she knew that Dieter enjoyed it too. During her years of flight and hiding, Kathe had never allowed herself to love. She had gotten scant encouragement. Twice she had bought freedom with her body. Once she had been raped by a *reiter*, who claimed he was a knight exercising *droit de seigneur*. She wondered what it would be like to make grown love with a man that she did not detest. But aside from saving her life, while being gracious, friendly, and giving, Dieter had made no moves to seduce her.

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She could feel him searching through words. Finally he told her, "We must go even further, far into the future. When all this will be only a vague memory."

"Why? Already I feel like a living ghost." Did this Gypsy ever settle down for more than a day or two?

"We must travel to where these paintings are *worth* something. To a place where you may be truly safe, and to where I can complete the pattern." He frowned, as though one goal contradicted the other.

She held tight to his hands. "I am afraid of going even farther from everything I know. Stepping into the circle is like destroying the world—the cards almost make me feel like a mass murderer."

"We are not killing anyone." He gave her his most rootless Gypsy smile. "We are just moving on."

Kathe sighed. Already she felt as rootless and cutoff as Dieter—she had not been born a Gypsy, but war and intolerance had made her one. She had had no true place ever since men in iron destroyed her village and burnt its women, turning her life to ashes. Now she must go on with Dieter, or give in and be consumed by tides of fire. She looked around her. This world too would pass away, but she would somehow survive.

They stepped into the pattern. Vermeer, his studio, the children who played in his yard, the peasants in the field, the Gypsies who had fed them, all disappeared.

The field did not change. It was still summer, but the air felt different. Burnt oily odors seasoned the drowsy pollen scent. Kathe wrinkled her nose. Hot air vibrated with distant rumblings, like thunder or a far-off cannonade. The Dutch farm houses had grown more numerous and more substantial, with shingle roofs and big glassed windows. Only a barn or two looked familiar.

"Brace yourself," Dieter advised, leading her up to the road that ran atop the nearest dyke. She was startled to find the road perfectly flat and unrutted—small pebbles were pressed into its pitch black surface. Standing atop the dyke, she saw a silver speck, high in the blue, trailing a long thin cloud behind it. Too big to be a bird, more like a low-flying angel.

She tried to show Dieter, but he grabbed her, telling her to watch out, pulling her off the roadway. The dull rumble turned into a roar. A gleaming mass of painted metal shot by, shining with chrome and spewing fumes. The steel vehicle sped along like a canon shell, propelled by some inner magic. Children riding inside pressed their faces against curved glass windows. Dieter waved to them.

"What was *that?"* Kathe watched in numb disbelief as the magic vehicle disappeared down the blacktopped dyke.

"A car. You'll get used to them. They own this century."

She saw another "car" coming. Dieter gave a cheery wave, sticking out his thumb. The vehicle roared by. Three more flashed past. Dieter shook

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his head. "The Dutch aren't being hospitable today." He gave up hitching, and they set off toward Nijmegen.

To Kathe's immense relief, they never got a ride, walking the whole dozen kilometers into town. She saw innumerable cars, and many, many people. The traffic circle at the top of the heights was a scene out of Dante. A hot haze hung over the Waal, filled with smoke from the cars—people, laughing and talking in light summer clothes, dodged the cars which went careening by, nearly colliding. She held tight to Dieter. The Dutch smiled at her peasant dress, and at Dieter's breeches and doublet. Dieter returned cheery greetings, thoroughly enjoying himself.

He took her to a coffee shop off the main square—all chrome and glass like the cars. Big block letters spelled out, *Den Plak*. Dieter steered her to a small table by the door. A honey-haired young woman came to serve them, wearing a thin shirt knotted at the waist, sandals and the briefest sort of pants—without a hint of underclothes. Nipples pressed against her shirt fabric. Long legs were browned by the sun. Kathe had never seen so much public flesh outside of paintings.

The semi-nude woman leaned forward, casually resting elbows on the table, fascinated by Kathe's very ordinary dress, commenting in a flood of Dutch. Dieter showed her one of Mendoza's gold *escudos*, which fascinated her even more. Taking the coin, she returned with mountains of food, fried potatoes, rolls stuffed with meat and vegetables, salt, sugar, strange condiments, and black cups of steaming coffee. Dieter grinned between bites. "Well, we've arrived!"

They had indeed. Kathe stayed speechless. Afterward, he walked her down quiet brick-and-cobble streets, shaded by tall trees. People rattled by on clattering black bicycles. Dieter stopped at a house with wide stone steps. A string hung out of a slot in the door—he pulled on the string, and the door swung open. Dieter called out in Dutch. An attractive dark-haired young man appeared in the doorway, inviting them in. He had broad muscular shoulders, an agreeable smile, and seemed to know Dieter.

The house was full of light, like the Vermeer paintings in Dieter's canvas bag, but the decor was not Dutch. Rattan mats covered the floor. Strips of oriental calligraphy hung from the ceiling. Everything smelled of strange spices. Children lay in the front room, staring at a strange box that made noise and showed pictures that moved.

The young man's name was Guido. He spoke Dutch with Dieter, and a peculiar sort of clipped German with Kathe, taking them into a back bedroom that opened onto a sunlit patio. Kathe stared at a curious picture hanging on one wall—a "movie poster," Guido said—which showed a tall handsome man wearing a uniform that reminded her of the one in Dieter's bag—decorated with swastikas and eagles. Guido laughed, asking if she recognized the man in Nazi regalia.

Kathe shook her head.

"Ronald Reagan," Guido explained. He saw the name meant nothing, and added that Reagan was President of *"Die Vereinigten Staaten."*

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Of Holland? Both Guido and Dieter found her question funny. *"Nein, von Amerika!"*

"Amerika?" Kathe had heard of that place across the sea, inhabited by Spaniards and painted savages. Ronald Reagan looked like neither. Dieter brought out the paintings. Guido studied them, loading a small black pipe with hashish, saying that Dieter had outdone himself. Passing the pipe back and forth, the two men plotted an art show, while Kathe napped on a chair in the patio.

The art show opened at midnight, in the basement of an abandoned brewery—a decaying building taken over by *Krakers*, who had turned the basement into a bar and coffee shop called the *Krakcafe*. Kathe asked Guido what *Kraker* meant.

He brought his hand down sharply in a chopping movement, saying to Kathe that *Kraker* came from the crack a lock makes when it is broken. She could hear banging going on above, and Guido told her that the squatters were busy constructing a theater, homeless shelter, and community center.

Art students had framed the paintings, hanging them alongside posters with incomprehensible—to Kathe—slogans like "Stop the Neutron Bomb" and "Catch the Dutch Disease." The *Krakers* were impressed—a few were even aghast. A visiting Dane wearing a lightning stroke BZ T-shirt demanded to know if the paintings were real.

"Touch them," Dieter suggested.

The Dane frowned. "I mean are they really *Vermeers*? Is that an actual Dürer woodcut?" Dieter admitted that they were.

"Millions of Gelders are hanging on the wall." Young people stared at the artwork hung on peeling concrete, awed by the Dane's claim.

"Are they stolen?" asked a wide-eyed punk with a hash pipe in her hand. She was wearing a leather jacket, blue jeans, and patriotic orange hair. A black circle-A was inked on her left cheek. Kathe could barely believe how Dutch women wore whatever they liked, and spoke as they pleased—in Trier, women had been tied to stakes and burned alive for far less.

Dieter accepted the pipe. "I know for a fact that the artists were paid."

"That is all that matters," concluded an aging Provo with gray in his ponytail. "Only the painters deserve to be paid, for their labor, minus the cost of paints and canvas."

"But what collections did they come from?" The Danish squatter in the BZ T-shirt remained a skeptic.

Dieter shrugged. "The Dürer came from the collection of a Spaniard named Mendoza, now deceased. The two Rubens and the portrait by Hals came from a Gypsy named Tinka. I bought the other two from Vermeer myself."

Everyone laughed, but they could get no sensible answer from him. The Dane was sure that something illegal had gone on, but no *Danish* laws had been broken. As for Dutch law?—the squatter was himself staying in Holland without a passport. The debate delighted Dieter. He

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repeated the main points to Kathe by candlelight in their room in Guido's basement. They lay on a narrow pad, sharing a single sleeping bag. "I cannot keep the paintings here too long," Dieter concluded. "White Mice might come nosing about." Dieter and Guido called the Dutch police "White Mice" or "Mr. Polite."

"What will you do with them?" Under the woozy spell of wine and hash, Kathe was enjoying Dieter's warm solid presence beside her on the sleeping bag. Surely this was the night they would make love.

"I need to take them where they will do the most good."

"Where?" It sounded like he would be traveling again.

"Somewhere dangerous," Dieter mused. "Gypsies have no word for duty, but we do have the pattern—and what we owe to the dead. You'll be safe enough here."

"I'm supposed to send you into the pattern alone?" Kathe was shocked. "How will you return?" Having lost so much, she was not about to now lose *Dieter* too.

For once he seemed very serious. "I brought you here because I like these people. They are not Gypsies, but they are genuinely done with war and nations. They are Dutch, Danes, Germans, Americans, and what not—whose fathers and grandfathers killed each other with carefree abandon—but they have given up fighting. You can't get them to kill anyone—not Russians, not even Arabs. And they are more to be trusted than Gypsies when it comes to homeless young women." Dieter kissed her. "Especially pretty ones."

The kiss was a delicious shock. The prospect of loving Dieter both excited and terrified her. She had never made love to a man she even half cared for—except perhaps for the son of the family she'd stayed with in Flanders. But even with that boy, she had held back; after her arrest, the poor lad must have endured the pangs of hell, finding out that he had been finger-fucking a witch. "I don't feel safe here—just confused. I want to be with *you*."

Dieter frowned. "Impossible. You don't know how risky and savage this twentieth century can be."

She looped her arms around his neck, locking her fingers to keep her Gypsy from getting away. "Have you forgotten where you found me? My whole life has been one great risk."

"Give this time and place a try," he insisted. "You could do far worse." He kissed her again, slower this time. She responded, stroking his tongue with her teeth, expecting him to lift her skirt.

Instead he took her upstairs to Guido's big tiled shower. "I will show you the greatest luxury of this century—it *almost* makes up for the two World Wars." Turning on the hot water, he sprinkled bath herbs on the tiles. The stall filled with scented steam. Slowly, he undressed her. Kathe's skin was stark white under the electric light, smelling of excitement, and caked with dirt; in the whole time they had been together, Kathe had bathed only once, in the cold waters of the Rhine.

He positioned her under the hot cascade from the shower nozzle, her

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bare hips pressed against the hard warm tiles, her feet braced in the corners of the stall. Dieter scrubbed both their bodies with spiced soap—his hands slid down her breasts and between her legs. Kathe realized that the sixteenth century had a lot to discover about sex and cleanliness. Intoxicated by the wine, the hash, the mad flood of steaming water, the clean spicy aroma, she felt him slip inside her, thrusting harder and harder. Breath coming in ragged gasps, Kathe held fast, vowing never to let go.

The paintings hung for nearly a week. Kathe soaked up as much of the twentieth century as she could, sitting with the children in the living room, watching "Dallas" and "The Dukes of Hazzard" with Dutch subtitles. She learned that America was an amazing place, where beautiful people raced about in fast cars, stopping only to make love or shoot at each other. "Dallas" was all about J.R.—a rich and handsome man, second only to Ronald Reagan in the nation's esteem. Kathe's interest delighted the local children—she was the first adult they'd ever met who was genuinely eager to learn from them. She would stay up until dawn with Guido and Dieter, talking, smoking hash, and listening to Randy Newman records—*Little Criminals* and *Sail Away*. Then she and Dieter would go down to the basement to make furious love, and fall asleep. After school, Dutch children would tiptoe down the stone stairs to see if Kathe was awake. She would slip out of the sleeping bag, with the odor of love-making still on her body, to sit on the floor watching the soaps—*von Amerika*!

On the last day, Dieter took her to see the ruins of Mendoza's citadel, reduced to shattered walls and pitted stone, its *trace italienne* bastions covered with grass. Four hundred years had passed since she'd sat here in a cell, waiting to be burned alive; to Kathe, it had been little more than a month. "I wanted you to see how deeply the past is buried," Dieter explained. "Going back will be far more dangerous. When I saw you in that cell, I already knew Tinka as an old woman. This time I am going into the pattern blind, or almost blind. I know the big events, but not *our* futures."

She stared out over the huge steel bridges that spanned the Waal, connecting Nijmegen to the "island" between the Waal and the Lower Rhine. A torrent of traffic roared in both directions. Without Dieter, nothing seemed safe. "You cannot make me spread the cards."

"I can find a Gypsy woman to do it."

"Will she go *with* you? Will she make sure you get *back?*"

"Probably not. A Gypsy woman would have more sense."

"Then there is nothing more to say." She saw him weakening. Was he as addicted to her as she was to him? Kathe was determined not to end up like Tinka, waiting out the years until Dieter came waltzing back into her life as though hardly a day had gone by.

"Enough!" he threw up both hands. "You begin to sound like Draga! Promise me this one thing."

"What is that?"

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"Do you swear that you will leave me the instant you are no longer in love?"

She looked shocked. "I suppose I would."

"No, no supposing," he insisted. "Swear to leave if you no longer love me."

"I swear it. But it is a silly oath."

"All marriage vows are silly. And I swear to leave *you* the moment *I* am no longer in love. Today, tomorrow, or centuries from now." He took out a clasp knife and the last of Mendoza's coins. Handing her the coin, he opened the knife.

She hefted the heavy gold *escudo*. "What is this for?"

"Your bride-price. Draga would howl at me for getting a woman so cheaply." There were no Gypsy women about to make sure he paid in full.

"You don't have to buy me," she laughed.

He nicked his left wrist with the knife. "Shush. This is a Gypsy wedding. The only one you are likely to get." He pressed the knife into her wrist, until the blade drew blood. Then he tied their wrists together with a handkerchief. "Now we are one blood. Man and wife. Sister and brother. No matter what happens, we will always belong to one another so long as we are in love."

On their way down from the grassy ramparts, they met a boy from Guido's block. He asked if they had been visiting the old fort. They smiled, saying that they had. Their hands were still clasped, bound loosely by the bloody handkerchief.

"Look what I dug up here." Reaching into his T-shirt, he pulled out a shell casing threaded on a string.

Dieter examined the shell. "German, 9mm," he decided. "It probably came from an MP40—a submachine gun."

The boy grinned, bowing his buzz-cut head in embarrassment. "It is nothing, you find a lot of them. From the war. When Nijmegen was occupied by the Nazis."

They returned to the field at night, with the paintings in their canvas case. Dieter put on his SS uniform. He had told Kathe to wear the peasant dress. "We are headed for a party—people will take it for a costume." He made her practice two patterns. One to get them there, the other to get them back. The first pattern was so demonic it scared her to spread it—filled with swords, built around Death, the Devil, and a bursting tower. "It was not just Gypsy talk when I said we were headed for dangerous times," he said as he buckled the Walther about his waist. "If we are separated, you must use the second pattern to return here at once. Understand?" Mutely, she nodded.

They stepped into the pattern, and the second half of the twentieth century vanished.

For the first time, Kathe came out at night, emerging into chill dark

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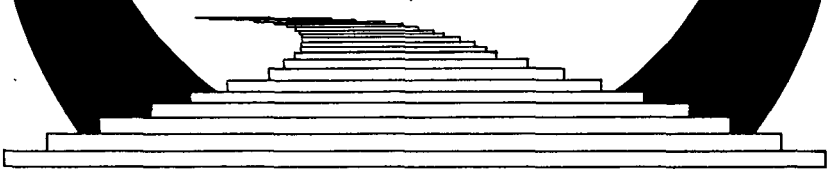

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air. It felt like early fall, after the summer stubble is burnt away. Dieter led her across deep furrows to the dyke road.

White headlights careened out of the darkness, and Dieter flagged down the vehicle, a tall four-wheeled truck. A startled Luftwaffe driver stuck his head out the window. In his most abrupt German, Dieter demanded the man's name, unit, and destination. Surprised to find a Waffen SS Lieutenant-Colonel and a woman in a Dutch peasant dress standing in the dark atop the dyke, the driver replied that he was from a base defense unit, just assigned to the newly created 1st Parachute Army. He was headed for Eindhoven. . . .

Dieter cut off the man's explanation. "My car has broken down, and I am on my way to meet with your commander, Colonel-General Student—carrying valuable articles meant for the Reichsmarshal." Since the driver was in a Luftwaffe uniform, mentioning Goering could not hurt. Dieter ordered the relief driver out of the passenger seat, handing him the canvas case full of paintings. "Get in the back and guard this." The man scrambled into the back, taking a seat atop boxes of 88mm FLAK ammunition. Dieter hopped up beside the driver, reaching down to help Kathe in.

She hesitated, having learned to dodge autos in the streets of Nijmegen, but never having ridden in one.

"Don't worry," Dieter patted the dash. "Just a truck." He glanced at the make—a Ford G 997T, 3-ton. "An *American* truck, but safe in German hands." The driver dutifully laughed at the colonel's joke. It was a sign of the sheer chaos reigning in Europe that the man was driving an American truck over Dutch roads for a German Army unit, while wearing an Air Force uniform. He did not even blink at being ordered about by an SS colonel. The First Parachute Army included invalids, sailors, coastal troops, flight mechanics, SS panzers, untrained boys, and grounded jump instructors—everything but parachutes.

Kathe climbed aboard. The driver gunned the engine, jammed the Ford into gear, and they bounced off down the dyke—he must have wanted to be gone before Reichsmarshal Goering himself stepped out of the shadows, demanding to be driven to Portugal. Kathe found her first ride sufficiently terrifying. Dieter shouted directions, as dark empty space rushed by the open windows. Without warning, the narrow dyke disappeared. The driver braked, shifted, spun the wheel. Then they tore off again, rattling over the cobbles of Groesbeek, climbing the heights beyond.

Dieter had told her something of what to expect—the gala they were going to was in the same *schloss* where he had met del Rio. But nothing prepared Kathe for seeing the witch hunter's tiny castle done over for a twentieth-century victory bash. Light flooded from towering windows and French doors. Big Mercedes staff cars crouched on the gravel drive, and a battery of quad-40mm FLAK guns was dug into the lawn—multiple black barrels aimed at the night sky. A band played Wagner.

As they approached the music, Dieter explained that he was not really

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meeting with Colonel-General Student, "Merely a hardworking field commander. I mean to meet with *Herr Direktor* Posen of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, a buyer for Reichsmarshal Goering. If Posen passes on these paintings, we will go on to Karinhall, Goering's estate in Germany. This Reichsmarshal is mad for art work—he has huge Renaissance desks, silver candelabras, even thrones. You won't believe it—the walls of Karinhall are papered with paintings, hung one above the other, four tiers high—I have done a happy business with this Reichsmarshal. But if we are caught, you know nothing. You are a peasant girl from Trier, I invited you to a party. And use the cards."

Inside, high-ranking Nazis were talking, drinking, making speeches, and pinning medals on Dutch collaborators. Tough, tall Dutch women in trailing evening gowns were having their cigarettes lit by heel-clicking SS officers—making the most of being occupied. Dieter guided her into the whirl of wine and faces. "Come, we will blend perfectly."

A fat genial Nazi introduced himself as the Gauleiter of Cologne, offering Kathe caviar, pouring her champagne. "You have to help us carry out the scorched-earth order." Seeing that she did not understand, the Gauleiter quoted from a recent directive, "Leave nothing for the enemy. Not a stalk of wheat, not a slice of meat . . ."

". . . not a glass of champagne." Dieter poured for himself.

"Exactly!" The Gauleiter grinned.

"Have you seen *Herr Direktor* Posen of the Karl Fried . . ."

A drum roll cut Dieter off. Drunk happy faces turned toward the windows at the back of the dining hall. A bright spark appeared on the dark forested slope outside, followed by a rumble, then a roar. Windows shook. A four-story metal rocket lifted from among the trees, climbing on a jet of fire, blasting upward, defying gravity to fling itself at an unseen target. Nazis cheered. The band played *Die Walküre.*

"Next stop London?" Dieter inquired.

"No, Antwerp," the Gauleiter sighed. "A fine little city. Entrusted to me by the Führer himself—until the British took it." He shook his head.

"To Antwerp." Dieter lifted his glass.

"To Antwerp!" the Gauleiter said, recovering his smile.

Other missiles followed the first—rising like giant candles, one by one, from hidden launchers. Somewhere in the surrounding forest, a V-2 battalion was hard at work. Each time there was a drum-roll warning. Then the launching. Then a cheer. And they would toast another city, and another 1,000 kilos of high explosive. Brussels. Liège. Paris.

Conversation would then resume. "Spee is coming to Aachen next week. You can tell him your . . ."

"Those cowardly bastard Finns have thrown it in . . ."

It reminded Kathe of *Walpurgis Nacht*, or Guido's Randy Newman LP *Sail Away*, the cut called "Political Science"—all about bombing London and Paree.

Nazis began pinning medals on each other. Dieter located the museum

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director, and rescued Kathe from the Gauleiter, guiding her past stained-glass windows and heavy velvet hangings—toward a small annex room. But as soon as he opened the door, she saw Dieter's face fall. Waiting with the nervous gray-haired *Herr Direktor* were six agitated Gestapo agents, who informed "Lieutenant-Colonel Harzer" that he was under arrest. The little *Herr Direktor* Posen seemed about to die of fright. Only Dieter took it all calmly, turning to Kathe with a concerned look, mouthing the words, "Use the cards." Kathe did not understand how horribly wrong things had gone until they forcefully separated her from Dieter. Suddenly she was alone with a pair of Gestapo men who would not let her go after Dieter, or even leave the room.

German Gypsies sang and danced, because
they knew their days were short.
—Konrad Bercovici

Gabelschwanz Teufel (Forktailed Devil)

Kathe's formal interrogation took place in that plush annex room. The Gestapo men turned two chairs to face each other, both decorated with the same cheerful Belgian upholstery. Kathe was given one chair; the two men shared the other, one sitting while the other paced and questioned her. A Gestapo stenographer and two officers—one in an SS uniform, the other from the Wehrmacht—sat together on an ottoman.

Kathe quickly made it plain that they would get no militarily useful information out of her. Yes, she knew there was a war on, but she had only vague notions of who Germany was fighting. Thinking of the missiles aimed at Antwerp and Brussels, she suggested, "The Spanish?"

The SS officer frowned, asking who Germany's allies were. She remembered the Ford truck and that President Reagan was a Nazi. *"Amerika!"* she answered brightly, glad she had the name ready. The Wehrmacht man grimaced.

She told them that she was from Trier, an orphan with no papers. She knew the year was 1944—Dieter had told her that much—but she knew nothing about the principles of National Socialism. She had never heard of Chancellor Hitler. No matter how her answers astonished the men, she persisted in being friendly and forthcoming. Convinced that her sole hope was to be utterly open and innocent, she looked them in the eyes, smiling as she answered, showing none of the fear or anxiety they were accustomed to seeing. It was hard not to believe her, harder still to believe that she knew what was happening.

The Gestapo interrogator concluded that she was mentally defective. "A simple backward girl from some Rhineland village."

"Or a very clever liar," suggested his partner.

"Or a foreigner posing as German." The SS officer shook his head. "She sounds like she learned her German from a Schiller play."

"Does it matter?" the Wehrmacht man lifted an eyebrow.

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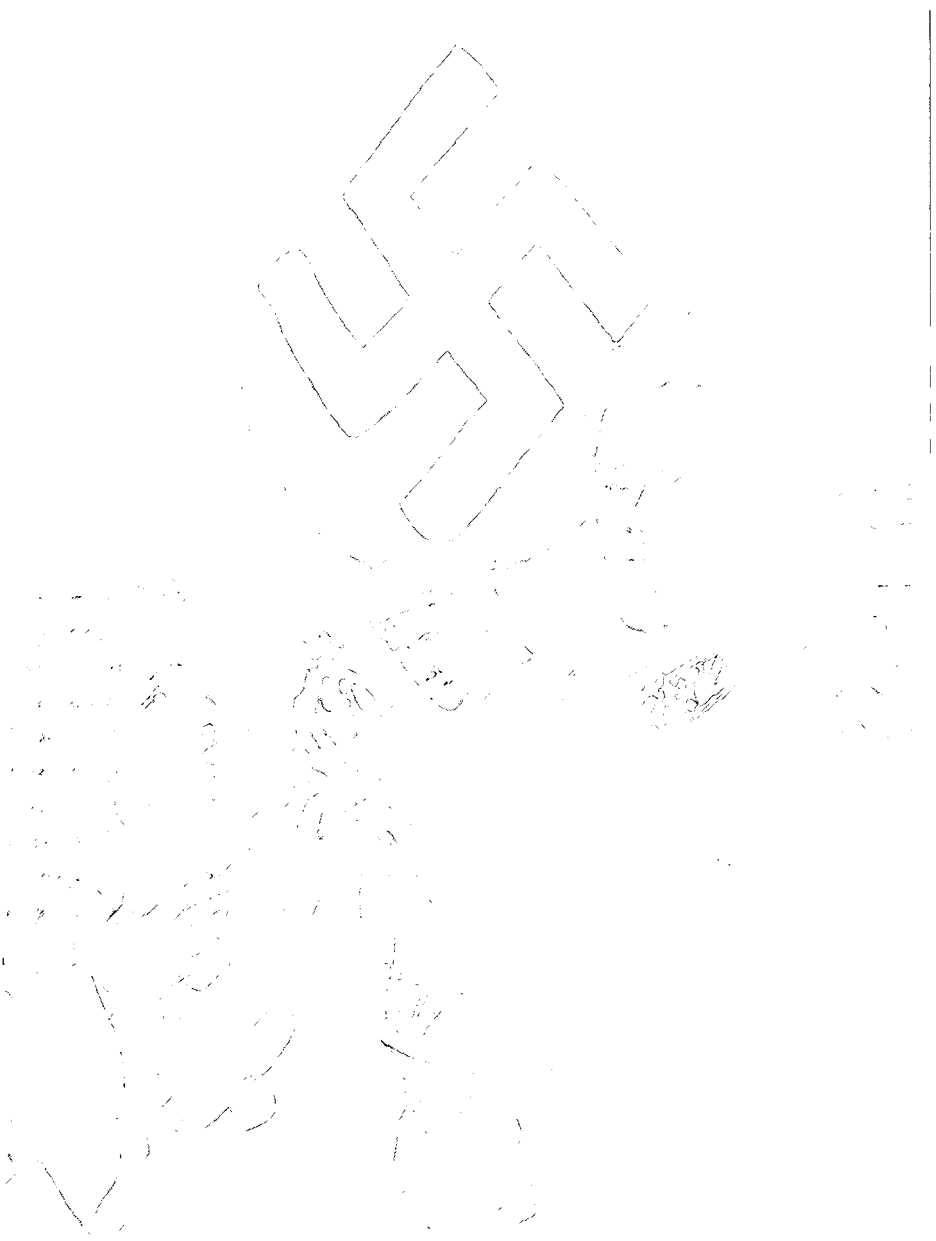

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The Gestapo interrogator shrugged. The stenographer closed his notebook. All such crimes carried the same sentence. Simpleton, foreigner, or spy, Kathe was headed for a concentration camp. Having decided on almost certain death for her, the men became more relaxed, even friendly. Her interrogators offered Kathe a cigarette, genuinely hoping to put her at ease while waiting for the car that would take her away.

The cigarette was as harsh as Guido's hash, but not as stimulating. She recognized this guilty good-humor—guards had been similarly kind to her family before they'd burned them to death. Mendoza had been unfailingly polite with her. But inside she was joyous, supremely confident, because *they had not taken her cards*. They had not even *asked* her about them. A minute alone, and she could be back with the *Krakers* in Nijmegen.

She could escape anytime she wanted to—but she was determined to bring Dieter back with her. Kathe could tell that that would be harder. Yet somehow, sometime, she was sure that they would bring her and Dieter back together. For further interrogation perhaps, or possibly a trial—she still had much to learn about the exact workings of Nazi justice.

Once she and Dieter were back together, she would spin some tale; she would promise these men anything, offer whatever it took to get that minute alone with Dieter, or just lay out a harmless game of cards.

The car came. Kathe was disappointed to discover that Dieter was not going with her, but she got in, hoping that wherever she was headed Dieter would be there too. The ride was not too terrifying—the driver was a wizard at night work—and sitting in the back seat of a great purring Mercedes, jammed between two Gestapo interrogators, was not nearly as frightening as jolting along in the front of a Ford truck filled with artillery shells.

Nijmegen Station was blacked out. Stepping out of the Mercedes, Kathe found the darkness full of noise and movement. Box cars were disgorging hordes of very young-looking Germans in uniform. They were being given rifles and *panzerfausts* right there in the station, to fill out Colonel-General Student's 1st Parachute Army with live bodies. Flatcars supported the shadowy bulk of *panzerjager* assault guns—their long iron snouts sticking out from under canvas. Nijmegen was sixty miles from the front, well within the range of allied tactical aircraft. Every second of darkness was precious to the Third Reich. Directed toward a square black cargo door, Kathe pulled herself up on to the cold floor of a box car. A man warned her to mind her legs. She pulled her feet inside, and the door rumbled shut. A lock clicked.

She was in a black metal box. But not alone. Kathe heard voices in the darkness, women's voices, and children's—speaking Dutch. She could tell by the tones it was a family talking quietly among themselves. This was a real improvement. She was in with women, children even, and would not have to worry about closing her eyes among men.

The train jolted into motion. Startled, Kathe felt frantically for her

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cards—they were still tucked in the bodice of her peasant dress. She relaxed. The first frightening jerks were replaced by the steady swaying beat of iron wheels on steel rails. Immensely tired, Kathe searched the darkness for a place to lie down. Her hands found a mattress, still warm, having taken some young soldier out of Germany into Holland. Kathe did not mind the sharp male odor—it reminded her of the sweaty sleeping bag in Guido's basement. She stretched out, lulled by the rhythm of the wheels, half-dreaming of Dieter.

Dawnlight entered the car through small chinks near the roof. Kathe sat up. There were several families in with her, although not whole families—she saw no men or grown boys. On the mattress nearest hers, a mother and teenage daughter were caring for several quarrelsome youngsters, two small boys and a toddler. Kathe watched them parcel out breakfast—apples and cheese.

The teenager was a thin active girl with black hair, large dark eyes, and luminous white skin, almost translucent. Kathe guessed it would be silky to the touch. The girl smiled at her, asking in Dutch, *"Wat wil je eten?"*

"Eten?" Kathe looked hungrily at the apples, having eaten nothing in 1944 besides cheap champagne and plundered caviar.

"Ja, eten." The teenager made eating motions, adding that her name was Ruth.

Ruth's mother smiled, and pushed half an apple into Kathe's hand. The mother's name was Miriam; she had wiry hair, Semitic features, and piercing blue Dutch eyes. Beneath the cheerful generosity, Kathe sensed a powerful sadness—as if Miriam knew it was hopeless to hoard food for her children. Their lives were already out of her hands. Kathe could tell that Ruth and Miriam were Jews, and that they thought that she too was a Jew, despite her blonde hair and Aryan features. She said nothing to dissuade them.

"Nederlander?" they asked.

"Nein." She shook her head, saying that she was German.

They seemed taken aback, but did not question her further. The day grew long. There was no toilet, just a bucket in the back of the car. Worse, there was no water. Champagne had dried out Kathe's head. Her tongue tasted like leather. She found herself staring at the door, sucking on an apple core, hoping that when the train stopped and the door opened, there would be water.

Without warning, the car slowed, swayed, and jolted to a stop. But the door did not open. Kathe pressed her ear against the cold metal. She heard an eerie, high-pitched wailing, which grew louder, more frantic, until it filled the box car, blotting out every other sound.

The walls of the car were fitted with bunks three tiers high. Kathe scrambled onto an upper bunk to look out through one of the chinks near the roof. At first, she saw only a patch of sky. Then she saw bright specks. More low-flying angels.

Ruth climbed up to be beside her, shouting in her ear, *"Vliegtuigen!"*

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By now Kathe knew what airplanes were. In America, J.R. owned a whole fleet of them. She watched them crawl across the blue, dragging thin white contrails behind them. Black puffs appeared ahead on the silver specks. Beneath the wailing, Kathe heard the cough of cannon —someone was shooting at the airplanes. By the time the specks were directly overhead, the heavens boiled with shell bursts.

Suddenly the whole box car shook, slapped by a giant hand. She saw smoke and debris shoot upward. Blows rattled the metal box, drowning out the wailing. Kathe braced herself between the high bunk and the roof, with Ruth's arms about her middle. The girl's head was buried in her stomach.

The explosions ceased. The bunk stopped bounding beneath her. The terrible wailing returned. All Kathe could see through the metal slit was a blue square of sky, dirtied by flak and crossed by white contrails.

The car door slammed open. Dazzling sunlight burst in. Men outside shouted, *"Juden. Raus!"*

She helped Ruth scramble back down. Miriam loaded her daughter with parcels, and Kathe took the two boys' hands. They tumbled out of the box car. As soon as she hit the ground, Kathe turned to help Miriam with the toddler. Soldiers kept screaming, *"Raus! Raus!"* and waving submachine guns. MP40s. The men behind the guns acted as though there were some great danger that the women and children would run, resist, or refuse to leave the box car.

Holding tight to the littlest boy, Kathe glanced about. The box car stood on the wreck of a railway station, ripped by rubble and bomb craters. Thirty paces up the track, a box car had been smashed to splinters. Bodies lay in the wreckage.

Soldiers herded the women and children together, then marched them through the smoking remains of the railyard. The wailing faded. Kathe saw forged steel rails twisted like fine wire. Reinforced concrete was cracked into chunks and heaved up at odd angles. Shattered glass crunched underfoot.

A locomotive wrecked in a previous attack lay upended, red with rust. Women in baggy coveralls were cutting off pieces of it with welding torches.

She passed the station house, cratered by a double row of direct hits, as though some wandering titan had trudged through the structure, too distracted to go around. The empty waiting-room had two walls sheared away. A table holding up a pot of flowers sat in one corner, miraculously intact. A second-floor door hung on its hinges, opening into empty air.

Beyond the station was a line of trucks—Fords, Opels, a couple of captured Chevys—waiting on the cratered roadway. Homes across the street had suffered as much as the station. Every window was boarded up or broken, and there were huge gaps in the line of rowhouses, blank spaces floored with rubble and twisted iron. Neat piles of relics dotted the pavement. A tea service. Two overshoes. A blue-eyed china doll.

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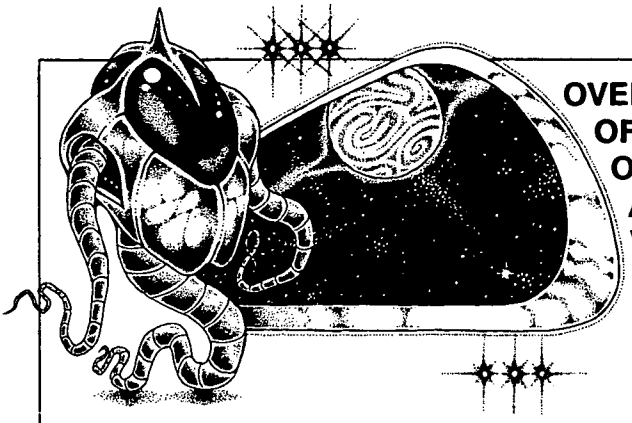

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Women and old men picked through the debris, pausing to shout insults at the Jews being loaded into the trucks, holding Ruth and Miriam responsible for the damage. Kathe could not fathom why. She climbed into the back of another Ford, along with Ruth, Miriam, the younger children, and several other families.

Two soldiers in field-gray uniforms hopped up beside Kathe, to sit at the tailgate. The line of trucks lurched into motion, weaving between the bomb craters as if they were oversized potholes. Over the rumble of the wheels, the younger soldier introduced himself as Kurt, offering Kathe the inevitable cigarette. Kathe pointed instead at his canteen. Kurt whipped the top off.

As she drank, Kurt looked her over. *"Juden?"*

She shook her head. *"Deutsche."*

Kurt shot a surprised look at his companion. The older man scowled. "Communist?"

Kathe gave him a blank look.

"She's too pretty to be a Red," Kurt replied for her. "A criminal, maybe?"

Kathe nodded. She supposed she was, though she could not have named her crime. That satisfied Kurt. They talked about home, and what it was like to be a soldier. Very bad, but not so bad here as in the East. Kurt was from East Prussia, and he never expected to see home again. Whenever Kathe asked where they were headed *now*, Kurt would veer off onto another subject.

Without warning, the truck swerved, half-colliding with the Opel in front of it. Kathe heard shouts and curses. Before the truck came to rest, Kurt had grabbed her about the waist, lifting her over the tailgate. He leaped, taking her with him, side by side into a ditch. His companion came down on top of them. Ruth and Miriam were still in the truck. But when Kathe lifted her head to look up, Kurt shoved her face back down into the mud.

Lying between the two soldiers, she heard the mad stutter of heavy machine-guns, and the rattle of canon shells, like rocks raining on a tin roof. Shaking off Kurt's grip, Kathe looked up. Fragments flew off the truck. Metal zipped by her head, kicking up tiny fountains of mud.

A huge silver aircraft with stars on its wings shot down the line of trucks, guns clattering. Kathe was buffeted by prop wash and the high-pitched blast of twin Allison engines. Then the plane was gone.

"Der Gabelschwanz Teufel!" The fork-tailed devil. Kurt's companion spat out the *Afrika Korps* nickname for the Lockheed P-38. *"Amerikaner."*

"Americans?" Kathe was aghast. "Why are they shooting at *us?*"

The older man stared at her. Kurt answered evenly, "That is what *every* soldier wants to know—I suppose it is because *we* are shooting at *them*."

The plane did not return. Kathe lay in the mud, listening to screams coming from the back of the truck. As soon as Kurt relaxed his grip, she

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vaulted out of the ditch and scrambled up the tailgate. The back of the Ford was riddled. A woman was rolling about, clutching her shattered leg, howling in pain. Another was holding a limp child splattered with blood.

Kathe found Miriam, Ruth, and the younger children in a heap near the cab, unhurt but shaken. Kathe tried to calm them, while she tore strips from her dress apron, using them to bandage the wounded woman's leg.

Kurt climbed over the tailgate, took one look, and sat down. "You need not bother."

Kathe looked at him. "How can you not help?"

The two soldiers said nothing. Kathe went over to see what she could do for the mother with her bloody child, but the baby was already dead.

Men rolled wrecked trucks into the ditch, and the convoy got moving again. The remainder of the trip was frightful. Children sobbed. The woman with the shattered leg would not stop moaning. The bereaved mother carried on a half-hysterical conversation with her dead baby —until Kurt threatened to throw the little body from the truck.

Kathe sat next to Ruth, hugging her the whole time. She could no longer wait for Dieter. This was too horrible. She had to use the cards, taking Ruth, Miriam, and the children with her—then somehow she would come back for Dieter. Only her fear of moving vehicles kept Kathe from spreading the tarot there in the truck. Instead, she sat in a spiritual coma, holding onto Ruth. They had to stop the truck *sometime*. Prisoners had to be fed. Or at least locked up for the night. Otherwise, what would stop someone from leaping out in the darkness?

Finally, the truck stopped. Kathe saw another, smaller rail station, surrounded by beech trees and piles of oiled wooden ties. A station without trains. The train that was supposed to be bringing them had been bombed to smithereens that morning. Guards with MP-40s ran up, forming a tight circle around the trucks. Standing at the tailgate, Kathe could see a camp lager beyond the beech trees, barracks rooftops ringed with double rows of barbed wire and high guard towers.

A handsome officer with soft golden hair walked down the line of trucks, carrying a clipboard and a thin, wicked-looking whip. He paused at each truck, ordering women out. Not all the women—just a handful from each truck. The whip scared Kathe, but she took his swastika armband as a sign of good luck, touching the cards hidden in her dress. Soon she would be on solid ground.

The officer stopped at their truck, calling up to Kurt. "How many?"

"Twenty-six."

His blue eyes fixed on Kathe. "You." He motioned with the clipboard. "Out of the truck."

She leaped lightly down. He ordered two more women out. Kathe felt a sick misgiving. The women being selected were all young and good-looking. The mothers with children, the older women, the plain women, were being left in the trucks. She shrank back against a fender, not

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wanting to be singled out, separated from Miriam and the children. She could imagine only one reason why these men wanted pretty young women.

The man motioned for Ruth. Miriam shook her head, drawing her daughter to her. The officer scowled, staring at Miriam and her children as though they were inert obstructions. His whip tapped against the top of his jackboot. The guard behind him raised the barrel of his MP-40.

Kathe stepped quickly forward, putting herself between Miriam and the gun. She reached up and took Ruth's hand, saying, "I will see that she is safe." She spoke in German, but her touch, her smile, her calm assurance, said everything. She had the cards—Ruth was safe, even among these men.

Frantically, Miriam divided her small stock of food, thrusting some sausage and a jar of marmalade into Ruth's arms. The girl descended, clutching her food, holding hard to Kathe's hand. Kathe turned and smiled at the officer, showing him that they would not make trouble.

Their eyes met. In that instant of contact, Kathe realized horrid things were about to happen. The man was not angry. For a moment he seemed to see Kathe as a person, an attractive smiling young woman, risking punishment to please him, to make his task easier. But she saw no feeling in his gaze, no compassion, not even desire—only a mild sort of surprise, instantly replaced by a vast indifference.

The blond officer turned briskly, made marks on his clipboard, and walked on to the next truck. The guard lowered his gun.

Selection done, the trucks rumbled off, trailing clouds of yellow dust, leaving the small knot of young women ringed by guards. Miriam stood at the receding tailgate, tears in her eyes, children clinging to her dress. She shouted thanks to Kathe. She blew a kiss to Ruth. Then they were gone.

No Gypsy ever voluntarily died for a principle.
—Konrad Bercovici

The Art of Conversation

Sitting in front of a plain wooden desk in a windowless Dutch cellar, Dieter faced two Gestapo interrogators and an SS light colonel. He talked volumes, trying to be polite but firm with his captors, pretending he still had bargaining power. Deiter gladly confessed to fraud, impersonation, misappropriation of Reich property, and consorting with Gypsies—but he insisted, "My sole desire is to trade valuable paintings for people currently being held for no good reason by the Reich. Goering was willing." The Reichsmarshal might parade about in dressing gowns, makeup, and pinky rings—but he damn well had the right priorities. "If Eichmann is set to trade Jews for trucks—why not accept precious artwork for Gypsies?"

The two Gestapo men glanced at each other, then at the SS man

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leaning against the unpainted concrete wall—no one was supposed to know that the head of the Jewish Section hoped to trade Jews for more Ford trucks. And Dieter had managed to veer far off the subject. The chief interrogator put his fists down on the desk, leaning forward. "We know for a fact these paintings are forgeries."

"Rubbish." Dieter shook his head. "They are authentic works by Rubens, Hals, and Vermeer. The woodcut is a Dürer."

They dragged in the terrified *Herr Direktor* Posen to testify about the paintings, sitting him in a stiffbacked chair across from Dieter. "The landscapes are only poor imitations of Rubens. . . ."

Dieter interrupted, "They are student works."

Posen looked from him to the Gestapo men, then went on. "But the portrait and the two so-called Vermeers are something totally different. I am really surprised to find them alongside such crude forgeries—since Rubens is much easier to fake." Posen adjusted his spectacles and warmed to his subject. "As you know, Hals and Vermeer are very different artists—but each was a genius, with a delicacy of detail almost impossible to copy. Hals' brushwork and Vermeer's use of light are unsurpassed, the height of the Dutch School. Such amazing falsifications are worthy of the originals."

"They are amazing because they *are* original," Dieter insisted. He spoke to the Gestapo men. "He has passed on the other paintings I delivered. Are the ones hanging in Karinhall fakes as well?" Once more Dieter had managed to drag Goering into the discussion.

The chief interrogator glared at Posen. "How do you *know* these paintings are forgeries?" Dieter had managed to turn the questioning around. Posen had to back down, or admit to being fooled before.

"For one, they are not catalogued in any known collection. . . ."

"Neither were the Rembrandts I got for you," Dieter reminded him.

Posen squirmed in his chair. "The materials prove that these paintings are fakes—very good ones to be sure. The forger was careful to use paint and canvas identical to sixteenth and seventeenth century originals. But paintings *age*—over time, colors darken, canvas deteriorates. The Vermeers in particular are very freshly painted. Within the last year. The Hals portrait is somewhat older—but not by five hundred years."

"And the Dürer? Is that a forgery? Did you submit it to the same tests?" Dieter smiled, seeing Posen squirm again.

"The Dürer is a problem," Posen admitted.

"How so?" Both Gestapo men and the SS officer were staring at poor Posen, who tried to hide behind his spectacles.

"It too is recent. Done in this century, but . . ." He did not want to finish.

"But you matched it microscopically against another copy of the print, the one in Berlin?"

Posen nodded miserably. "Line by line, they were identical."

"So, what is your explanation?" Dieter seized the upper hand. "Two

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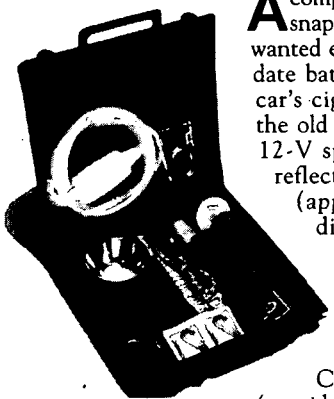

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identical woodcuts—printed five hundred years apart? Ridiculous, eh, *Herr Direktor*?"

The head interrogator made an icy interruption, to get the session back under Gestapo control. "Perhaps you would explain the paradox?"

Dieter grinned. "Delighted, but . . ." He nodded toward Posen. "The explanation involves vital military secrets, of little interest to the Kaiser Freidrich Museum."

Posen was gratefully dismissed, replaced by two officers—one from the Waffen SS, the other from the regular Wehrmacht. Dieter saw his interrogation progressing splendidly. Posen was disposed of. Now, if need be, he could play the military off against the Gestapo. Eyebrows went up as he plunged into a basic description of time travel.

"Absurd!" the Wehrmacht officer snorted. "Common sense and simple physics prevent it."

Dieter sneered. "Einstein's physics? *Jewish* physics? We Gypsies have discovered a way around it. How else would I have gotten freshly painted Vermeers? Portraits by Hals? Woodcuts by Dürer less than a century old?" Now that Posen was no longer there to object, Dieter presented the paintings as proof.

"How could Gypsies have solved such a monumental problem?" The Waffen SS was skeptical, but interested.

Dieter smiled. "We stole it. Physics in the far future—*German* physics, not Jewish physics—solved the problem of time travel. We Gypsies stole the secret. I can prove what I am saying. What is the date today?" Dieter had been underground too long to be sure.

"September 10th."

Dieter closed his eyes, pausing for dramatic effect like Draga before her crystal ball. "Tomorrow, September 11th—U.S. troops will enter Luxembourg. The next day they will be in Reich territory. In two days, on September 13th, Rumania will sign an armistice with the enemy. September 14th, the Americans will enter Maastricht. By September 15th, Field Marshal Model will move Army Group B headquarters to Oosterbeek." Prediction was no problem, since Dieter had memorized every major military event for the month of September.

"Why should we believe you?"

"You do not have to. Wait four days, and it will all come true. But do not wait too long. The next time gate will open at 1300 hours on September 17th. Then I can give you a full demonstration—but I must have the Gypsies on that list. And the woman who was taken with me."

"Why?"

"The Gypsies are to show your faith in me, and that woman alone has the power to unlock the time gate." Despite his warnings, Dieter was positive Kathe had not used the cards. He knew her too well. She would have waited, trying to free him. Senseless, stupid, but just what he must do for her—they would get out together, or not at all.

"I will make one more prediction." He could see them wavering. "Fifty years from now, Germany will have shrugged off the effects of this foolish

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war—the Reich will rise again, united and stronger than ever. The new Germany will have supersonic jets, T-72 tanks, and nuclear weapons on its soil—some all too loosely guarded. There will also be Germans glad to help you smuggle weapons back here—perhaps enough to change history. Frankly, this is your one chance. Without such aid, Germany will lose the war in less than a year. But you do not need a Gypsy to tell you *that!*"

The interview dragged on. Dieter repeated himself *ad nauseam* until it was clear that he would not change his story. The two SS men kept giving him interested looks. The Gestapo left in a huff, hinting they would bring a torture expert from Berlin. Dieter blandly replied that torturing him would hardly beat the Americans.

Days passed underground. Dieter noticed changes in his jailor's attitude. More food. Better food. Cigarettes. Hints of friendliness. All sure signs that his predictions were coming true. His next interrogation was SS only. Wehrmacht and Gestapo had been squeezed out. Dieter had wanted something like this—whoever most *needed* to believe him would put themselves in charge. He wondered what these SS men had done to make them especially fear defeat.

The session opened with jovial introductions. The head interrogator introduced himself as *Obersturmbannführer* Friedrich Wolfard, sitting on one corner of the desk, swinging a polished jackboot. Dieter casually asked how they had found him out at the *schloss*. He wanted to feed the man's smug superiority, letting the SS think that they were in command.

Wolfard laughed, "The *real* Colonel Harzer has a sabre scar." He traced the line on Dieter's unmarked cheek. "He is with his division north of Arnheim—perhaps we could arrange an introduction?"

Dieter smiled ruefully. "You might warn him that the Dutch underground will try to blow the viaduct at Schaapsdrift—on the night of the 15th."

"Another prediction?"

"As true as the ones before."

Wolfard eyed him warily. "You have been astoundingly correct. The part about Marshal Model's headquarters was most convincing. Model did not *begin* to look for a new command post until the next morning. Tonight he sleeps in Oosterbeek."

Dieter shrugged. "I could lay out the whole rest of the war for you, but you would find it depressing."

"Perhaps. First tell us why your demonstration must take place at 1300 on the 17th."

Dieter gave Wolfard his best Gypsy smile. "We use the time gates, but we did not *make* them. I can only promise that there will be an opening at that time. One step and you will be in post-war Germany—a strong and united Germany, where you will find friends. Perhaps even the weapons to change history." Dieter did not say it, but Wolfard was wise enough to know that whoever stepped through need not come *back*. Why wait around to see what the Allies' post-war plans were for SS officers?

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Wolfard at least could start over in a new Germany. Dieter let him think on that. Then he added, "But I must have the woman I was with; without her, the gate will not open."

"Why so?" Wolfard was politely suspicious.

Dieter shrugged again. "Something to do with how time gates work." He was veering ever farther from the truth, but the Nazis' saving virtue was their grasping stupidity. "That woman has the talent for opening the gates—otherwise she would not have been with me."

"I cannot promise anything—she has been sent to a concentration camp."

Dieter had feared that. "If she is dead, the gate will not open. Then there is no hope of getting to the new Germany."

"And if you are lying, there is little hope for *you*."

"But of course!" Dieter smiled cheerfully—when a Nazi started to threaten, you knew that you were getting through to him. "Just get the woman, or we are *all* doomed men."

Why was Christ crucified with three nails?
Because Gypsies stole the fourth.

—Gypsy proverb

Der Hexenkessel (The Witch's Caldron)

Kathe swayed on her feet. Around her were lines of young women—more than ten thousand. They had all been standing since before dawn, being counted. By now the sun was high up, and she shivered with sweat—her head shaved, wearing nothing but a striped prison shirt and stiff Soviet trousers. Ruth stood beside her, slumped and miserable.

"Keep standing," Kathe whispered.

SS women, big-hipped, with hard faces and black boots, walked between the lanes of young women, looking for those who fell, for the weak, the sick, the insolent, or the dispirited. "Keep standing," Kathe repeated. "Here they come."

Ruth straightened up, tightened her lips, and looked forward.

A heaving struggling circle of women shuffled past, herded by a ring of camp guards. The doomed women groaned and sobbed, some cried out. To be tossed into that ring meant death. It meant being stripped, led to an open trench, then machine-gunned or shot in the head by an SS officer.

But this was not a bad selection—only a hundred or so would die this morning. Ten thousand women watched them being dragged away. Kathe stood, eyes front, looking beyond the lanes of women, beyond the terrified circle, beyond the wire and watchtowers, beyond the guards and machine-guns. She saw clouds above, and birds soaring easily over the wire.

After roll call, she and Ruth gulped down cold coffee in the barracks, sitting on a hard unpainted bunk. She put an arm around the girl, sharing her coffee and resolve. It had not taken Kathe long to see how

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the camp worked. "We have to hoard our strength and will. It's the only way to survive."

Ruth gave a shudder. "How can we hope to survive?"

"Look at the Block Elder. She's survived six years, through five camps."

"I can't take even one year."

"The war will be over in less than a year."

"How do you know?"

"Dieter told me." By May, the war would be done with, though Kathe had no idea who was winning. She kept on talking, half in German, half in Dutch, half to Ruth, half to herself. "When I was your age—years and years ago—I lived through worse than this. I saw my family burned, my village destroyed. I alone survived. In Nijmegen, when the Spaniard had me, they meant to burn me, but I saw Dieter. I told him with my eyes, 'Take me. Take me too.' Again I survived."

She looked out the open barracks door, into the camp compound. Blackened bodies hung from the punishment gallows. Two towheaded girls with unshaved heads played in the dirt by the door. Miriam's little ones had been murdered on the first day, along with their mother. This pair had somehow slipped through—perhaps they were too Aryan to be killed. Kathe sensed an awful arbitrariness about camp survival.

If she had meant to die of despair, she would have done it promptly, on that first day. Guards had hurried her and Ruth into the camp lager, past high fences, barbed wire, and barking dogs. Just inside the wire, they were told to pile their belongings. Suitcases, parcels, blankets, handbags, and loaves of bread landed in a heap. Ruth gave up her sausage and marmalade. The last real food they had touched.

Kathe kept the cards hidden in her dress.

At the next shed, they were told to strip. "Come, come, you must be disinfected. You cannot go into the showers with your clothes on." Women timidly took off their clothes. Dresses, blouses, coats, shoes, and underwear, landed in another heap. Men laughed at such modesty. "*Macht schnell*, into the showers." The bath house was cold and dank. There were no stalls. She huddled with Ruth under a shower head, thinking only of her cards in the pile outside. The outer door clanged shut. Cold, icy water cascaded over them, making her wince. Showering was not the wonder of the century here, the way it had been with Dieter.

There were no clothes waiting for them, just barbers who shaved their heads. Her long golden hair fell to the floor. When they were given clothes, they were not her clothes. Not even women's clothes. Kathe stared dumbly at a pair of men's trousers, reeking of disinfectant. Someone hit her on her naked back. "Stupid Jewess, get dressed! You must have seen how a man puts on his pants."

Inside the barracks, she asked the Block Elder, "Where are my clothes? They said we would get them back."

Five camps ago, the Block Elder had been young herself—now she was drawn and gray. She glared at Kathe. "They lied. Do you think people who would kill truckloads of women and children care about *truth?*" The

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Block Elder raised her voice, so the whole barracks could hear. "I will tell you once and for all: Your clothes and your possessions are gone. Your families and friends are dead. Your mothers. Your fathers. Your brothers. Your little sisters. They are all dead. Their bodies are being burned. Outside you can see the smoke." An oily pall hung over the camp, all that remained of Miriam and the children. And Kathe's cards. If Kathe had meant to die of despair, it would have been then.

Ruth looked up from her coffee. "Kathe, how old are you?"

Kathe smiled. "Four hundred years. Five hundred. Does it matter? It only matters that I am alive. And as long as I am, I will not let you die."

"And you are not even Jewish."

She shook her head. "I am German—and maybe a little Gypsy." She thought of the time in Vermeer's studio, when the painter had shown her his camera obscura, picturing her image on the white canvas. Kathe felt like that image, half-alive, able to move, but turned-about and insubstantial. And she could vanish in an instant if someone blew out the light.

Two shadows blocked the bright doorway. Kathe recognized the short square Block Elder—with her was a man in a peaked cap and jackboots. Dieter? When he stepped into the dim barracks, Kathe saw he was just another SS officer—not a Gypsy in disguise. The Block Elder introduced him respectfully. "This is *Obersturmbannführer* Wolfard. He has come for you, Kathe."

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Kathe reached over and took Ruth's hand, twining their fingers together. She studied the Block Elder's bland face. The woman had repeatedly warned them, "Stick to the barracks. Don't try to escape. Don't ask to go to the hospital. Don't go with men and get pregnant. You will be killed for it." Every so often, SS women came through the barracks, looking for the sick, the listless, looking for anyone lost enough to go with them. Those who did, never came back.

But to disobey, that too was death. She searched for some warning in the Block Elder's face. No warning. Nothing. Just a slight nod, a hint of encouragement that said, "This is something you must do." So she stood up, still holding Ruth's hand. The Block Elder stepped forward to separate them. Kathe pulled the teenager tightly to her, looking straight at the SS man. "This is my sister. We go together."

Standing there in shapeless outfits, heads shaved—they might have been sisters. Kathe smiled broadly, to show that she was not defiant, but that she was determined. They would not be separated except by force. She had let herself be separated from Dieter, from Miriam, from her own family. She would not give up Ruth. If this meant death, they would die together.

Wolfard was annoyed and taken aback. But he was not camp SS. For him, Ruth hardly existed. Half the names on Dieter's list were now dead. Dieter wanted Gypsies—this girl was a Jew. So what? One woman, more or less, what did it matter? "Come," he commanded. Dieter would have to make do with a Jew.

Kathe followed him into the blinking sun, leading Ruth. Women watched them walk across the compound to the camp gate. On the far side of the dogs and wire, a Mercedes staff car waited.

At the car door, Kathe stopped. This man clearly did not mean to kill her. He could have done that in the camp yard, with the pistol in his belt. He needed her for something. Well, she had needs, too—so she smiled again. "We are missing dinner. We need food." Dinner was coarse bread spread with greasy margarine—but she made it sound like a meal to be missed.

Wolfard gave an order to his driver. The man produced bread and sausage—fine wheat bread soft as cake, and dark smoked sausage with big flakes of fat and garlic in it. She and Ruth sat in the back of the staff car, tearing happily at the bread and sausage. Wolfard watched, quietly amazed.

The Mercedes took them to a tiny airfield, camouflaged to keep it from being bombed. There they were locked in a shed, with a number of starved and sullen Gypsies—dirty ragged men and women, comforting gaunt hollow-eyed children. Kathe gave them all broad smiles. Gypsies meant Dieter.

Wolfard's driver brought them two cotton dresses with gay summer prints. Kathe and Ruth changed right in front of the driver, shocking the Gypsies—but after the camp, it was nothing to strip in front of strange men. At dusk, they were hustled into a gaunt angular Junkers

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transport with corrugated iron skin and three oily BMW engines. It smelled of gasoline and cold metal—but Kathe did not care; finally she had found a machine that would take her to Dieter. Her only regret was that she did not have the cards. The chance to rescue both of them was gone.

The Junkers rumbled out onto the field. Through a window, Kathe could see the dim bulk of a wing, and blue exhaust flaring from an engine slung underneath. Gathering speed, the tri-motor bounced and rattled as if it meant to fall apart before it could get airborne. Abruptly, the bouncing stopped. Runway lights fell away. They were flying.

Kathe could see nothing of where they were going, but she sensed vast, endless depths of night beyond the blue exhaust flames. Once they passed an Allied bomber stream—an unforgettable sight. "Christmas tree" flares and flak bursts turned the bomber column into a river of fire. Searchlight beams waved from atop jewel-like flak towers, catching the aircraft in cones of light—a stricken bomber flamed in a dazzling arc, then vanished. Far off, a city was burning. Ghostly orange flames lit up a patch of the darkness. Bombers streamed toward the holocaust, to stoke the fires. It dawned on Kathe that Germany was not just fighting, but *losing*, losing badly. Night and day death rained down, and nothing seemed able to stop it.

By morning, they were on the ground, riding through Arnhem in a truck. Kathe recognized the old buildings—main streets were wider now, with double lanes for cars. Then they were on the island, the flat expanse of polder between the river forks, whipping past Dreil and Elst. They rumbled over the Waal bridge, through Nijmegen, and up the Groesbeek heights. Bombs kept falling, but by now she expected them.

As Dieter drew closer, Kathe's main concern was that she was coming to him empty-handed, with no hope of saving him or her, or Ruth. The truck took them straight to the field, where they shared a noon meal with the crew of a flak battery sited at the edge of the Reichswald—the men bragged that combat troops got the best food, happy to chat with women, even sickly looking prisoners with shaved heads.

Staff cars arrived. Wolfard was in the first one, wearing civilian clothes. With him was Dieter. Kathe stood up so that he could see her. Dieter said something to Wolfard. The SS man nodded, and Dieter strode over the field toward her, steps lengthening into a run. Kathe could not wait. She set off toward him, with Ruth bounding after her. They met in mid-field, hugging, kissing, exchanging greetings.

"You look smashing," he laughed, stroking her starved body through the thin dress.

"I look a mess." She almost cried. "And I lost the cards!"

He shook his head. "A smashing, wonderful mess. Don't worry about the cards."

"But if I had them now, we could be free."

"We will be free. Now who is this?" He nodded to Ruth. Kathe reached out and drew Ruth over to them, telling Dieter who she was.

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Wolfard came up. "It's 1300 hours, 17 September. Where is your time gate?" The field looked empty as ever.

Dieter shot him a smile. "Your watch is fast. Don't worry. You got her here—that is all that matters. Is your team ready?"

Wolfard indicated his group of SS men, dressed like Dieter in nondescript civilian clothes, carrying heavy unmarked attaché cases. Gypsy eyes could tell from the way that the attaché cases were carried that they contained gold bars, twenty-four carat, 99 percent fine. "We have passports made to your specifications." Wolfard handed Dieter one of the little books.

Dieter leafed through it. "Excellent job. Couldn't have done better myself. I hope you have not loaded yourself down with weapons. Where we are going, they will just get you into trouble."

Wolfard shrugged. "A pistol or two. We cannot trust you completely."

"Naturally." Dieter nodded, smiling broadly. "I hardly trust myself half the time. In a few minutes, the time gate will open."

Kathe looked at him, not understanding this nonsense about time gates. Without the cards, they were stranded. He had told her so many times. She had thrown away their only chance.

Suddenly the flak battery opened up. An SS man shouted, "Bombers!" The air throbbed with engines, and Kathe saw a great stream of aircraft appear over the Groesbeek, coming in low from the south, shells bursting around them. Everyone threw themselves down in the furrows. She lay flat between Dieter and Ruth. Wolfard and his men sprawled a few paces off, hugging the earth, waiting for the stream to pass. Staff cars took off, bouncing over the plowed ground, heading for the safety of the Reichswald.

An angry buzz bore down on them. Kathe looked up. A fighter-bomber was making a firing pass over the field. Dieter shouted, "Heads down! It's a Mustang."

Side-slipping, sun at its back, the P-51 dived straight for the flak battery where Kathe had eaten lunch, six .50 calibre guns going. The 40mm flak guns hammered back. Kathe lay terrified, watching the battle between the plane and battery—a head-to-head duel in the afternoon between the Mustang and the guns. Higher overhead, the great river of aircraft filled the Dutch skies. White parachutes were opening in midair. Soldiers were leaping out of the oncoming aircraft, descending through the flak and fighters.

"God in Heaven!" moaned an SS man.

The Gypsy families stopped stuffing themselves on German rations and disappeared into the Reichswald. One of them waved jauntily to Dieter as they lost themselves among the trees. Dieter reached out and touched Kathe, squeezing her hand.

"What's happening?" she asked.

He explained that the 505th and 508th regiments of the "All American" 82nd airborne division were landing around them. Behind them, in gliders, was the headquarters of the British 1st Airborne Corps. Like

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Maurice of Nassau, they wanted the Waal bridge. The Battle of Nijmegen had begun again.

The drop had come without warning, without pathfinders or advance preparation. Paratroopers landed, discarding their chutes, drawing their guns. SS men scrambled to their feet, hands raised in surrender. Hundreds of Allied soldiers milled about them, thousands more were leaping out of the torrent of aircraft. Kathe saw great long chains of fighters, transports, and towed gliders—from Eindhoven to Arnhem, twenty-thousand men, four-hundred vehicles, and more than three-hundred cannon were descending on Holland by air.

As usual, Dieter alone did not seem surprised. He got up, drawing Kathe and Ruth up with him, dusting their summer dresses. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could have told you, but . . ." He tilted his head toward the SS men. Wolfard saw the nod and shot Dieter a dirty look. "That's why it didn't matter about the cards. There are always more cards. We will find a Gypsy caravan, and be back in business."

An American captain walked up, an unlit cigar clamped in his teeth, a huge crude .45 automatic in one hand. He seemed surprised to find Dieter holding two joyous young women with shaved heads in bright summer dresses. Speaking around his cigar, he asked, "Dutch or German?"

"Oh, no," laughed Dieter. "We are Gypsies!"

The captain looked pleased to hear English spoken so promptly in a Dutch field. "What about them?" He waved his .45 at Wolfard and the others—the American had barely arrived in Holland, but Kathe could see him taking charge. Just as J.R. would do.

"SS officers," Dieter replied. "Out of uniform, carrying false papers and concealed pistols."

"Ya don't say?" The captain grinned and reached into his pocket. "Well, have a goddamn cigar, Mr. Gypsy! You've just been liberated!" ●

NEXT ISSUE

Well, next issue is our December issue, and, in keeping with long tradition, we'll feature a Christmas story in it—in fact, we'll feature *two* of them! First up is **Janet Kagan,** one of our most popular authors, returning with our December cover story, "The Nutcracker Coup." In this one, Janet takes us across the galaxy to a distant planet for the wry and yet ultimately poignant story of a homesick diplomat from Earth who teaches some inquisitive resident aliens about some old Earth customs, with some *very* surprising results, including a few that are literally world-shaking! This is a hugely entertaining story, with an evocative cover by **David Cherry,** so don't miss it! Next, new writer **Diane Mapes** spins one of the most unusual Christmas stories you've ever read, as she relates the bizarre fate that awaits a lonely woman who has a Holiday Close Encounter with "The Man in the Red Suit." Plus Holiday poems by

(Continued on page 175)

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SEPULCHER

Ben Bova

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Dorn's left hand was prosthetic. He made no attempt to disguise it. Beneath the rough fabric of his shabby tunic and threadbare trousers, how much more of him was metal and electrical machinery? Tattered though his clothing was, his calf-length boots were polished to a high gloss.

"A priest?" asked Miles Sterling. "Of what church? What order?"

The half of Dorn's lips that could move made a slight curl. A smile or a sneer, Elverda could not tell.

"I will show you to your quarters," said Dorn. His voice was a low rumble, as if it came from the belly of a beast. It echoed faintly off the walls of rough-hewn rock.

Sterling looked briefly surprised. He was not accustomed to having his questions ignored. Elverda watched his face. Sterling was as handsome as cosmetic surgery could make a person appear: chiseled features, earnest sky-blue eyes, straight of spine, long of limb, athletically flat midsection. Yet there was a faint smell of corruption about him, Elverda thought. As if he were dead inside and already beginning to rot.

The tension between the two men seemed to drain the energy from Elverda's aged body. "It has been a long journey," she said. "I am very tired. I would welcome a hot shower and a long nap."

"Before you see it?" Sterling snapped.

"It has taken us months to get here. We can wait a few hours more." Inwardly she marveled at her own words. Once she would have been all fiery excitement. Have the years taught you patience? No, she realized. Only weariness.

"Not me!" Sterling said. Turning to Dorn, "Take me to it now. I've waited long enough. I want to see it now."

Dorn's eyes, one as brown as Elverda's own, the other a red electronic glow, regarded Sterling for a lengthening moment.

"Well?" Sterling demanded.

"I am afraid, sir, that the chamber is sealed for the next twelve hours. It will be imposs—"

"Sealed? By whom? On whose authority?"

"The chamber is self-controlled. Whoever made the artifact installed the controls, as well."

"No one told me about that," said Sterling.

Dorn replied, "Your quarters are down this corridor."

He turned almost like a solid block of metal, shoulders and hips together, head unmoving on those wide shoulders, and started down the central corridor. Elverda fell in step alongside his metal half, still angered at his self-desecration. Yet despite herself, she thought of what a challenge it would be to sculpt him. If I were younger, she told herself.

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If I were not so close to death. Human and inhuman, all in one strangely fierce figure.

Sterling came up on Dorn's other side, his face red with barely suppressed anger.

They walked down the corridor in silence, Sterling's weighted shoes clicking against the uneven rock floor. Dorn's boots made hardly any noise at all. Half-machine he may be, Elverda thought, but once in motion he glides like a panther.

The asteroid's inherent gravity was so slight that Sterling needed the weighted footgear to keep himself from stumbling ridiculously. Elverda, who had spent most of her long life in low-gravity environments, felt completely at home. The corridor they were walking through was actually a tunnel, shadowy and mysterious, or perhaps a natural chimney vented through the rocky body by escaping gases eons ago when the asteroid was still molten. Now it was cold, chill enough to make Elverda shudder. The rough ceiling was so low she wanted to stoop, even though the rational side of her mind knew it was not necessary.

Soon, though, the walls smoothed out and the ceiling grew higher. Humans had extended the tunnel, squaring it with laser precision. Doors lined both walls now and the ceiling glowed with glareless, shadowless light. Still she hugged herself against the chill that the others did not seem to notice.

They stopped at a wide double door. Dorn tapped out the entrance code on the panel set into the wall and the doors slid open.

"Your quarters, sir," he said to Sterling. "You may, of course, change the privacy code to suit yourself."

Sterling gave a curt nod and strode through the open doorway. Elverda got a glimpse of a spacious suite, carpeting on the floor and hologram windows on the walls.

Sterling turned in the doorway to face them. "I expect you to call for me in twelve hours," he said to Dorn, his voice hard.

"Eleven hours and fifty-seven minutes," Dorn replied.

Sterling's nostrils flared and he slid the double doors shut.

"This way." Dorn gestured with his human hand. "I'm afraid your quarters are not as sumptuous as Mr. Sterling's."

Elverda said, "I am his guest. He is paying all the bills."

"You are a great artist. I have heard of you."

"Thank you."

"For the truth? That is not necessary."

I was a great artist, Elverda said to herself. Once. Long ago. Now I am an old woman waiting for death.

Aloud, she asked, "Have you seen my work?"

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Dorn's voice grew heavier. "Only holograms. Once I set out to see The Rememberer for myself, but—other matters intervened."

"You were a soldier then?"

"Yes. I have only been a priest since coming to this place."

Elverda wanted to ask him more, but Dorn stopped before a blank door and opened it for her. For an instant she thought he was going to reach for her with his prosthetic hand. She shrank away from him.

"I will call for you in eleven hours and fifty-six minutes," he said, as if he had not noticed her revulsion.

"Thank you."

He turned away, like a machine pivoting.

"Wait," Elverda called. "Please—How many others are here? Everything seems so quiet."

"There are no others. Only the three of us."

"But—"

"I am in charge of the security brigade. I ordered the others of my command to go back to our spacecraft and wait there."

"And the scientists? The prospector family that found this asteroid?"

"They are in Mr. Sterling's spacecraft, the one you arrived in," said Dorn. "Under the protection of my brigade."

Elverda looked into his eyes. Whatever burned in them, she could not fathom.

"Then we are alone here?"

Dorn nodded solemnly. "You and me—and Mr. Sterling, who pays all the bills." The human half of his face remained as immobile as the metal. Elverda could not tell if he was trying to be humorous or bitter.

"Thank you," she said. He turned away and she closed the door.

Her quarters consisted of a single room, comfortably warm but hardly larger than the compartment on the ship they had come in. Elverda saw that her meager travel bag was already sitting on the bed, her worn old drawing computer resting in its travel-smudged case on the desk. Elverda stared at the computer case as if it were accusing her. I should have left it home, she thought. I will never use it again.

A small utility robot, hardly more than a glistening drum of metal and six gleaming arms folded like a praying mantis's, stood mutely in the farthest corner. Elverda stared at it. At least it was entirely a machine; not a self-mutilated human being. To take the most beautiful form in the universe and turn it into a hybrid mechanism, a travesty of humanity. Why did he do it? So he could be a better soldier? A more efficient killing machine?

And why did he send all the others away? she asked herself while she opened the travel bag. As she carried her toiletries to the narrow alcove

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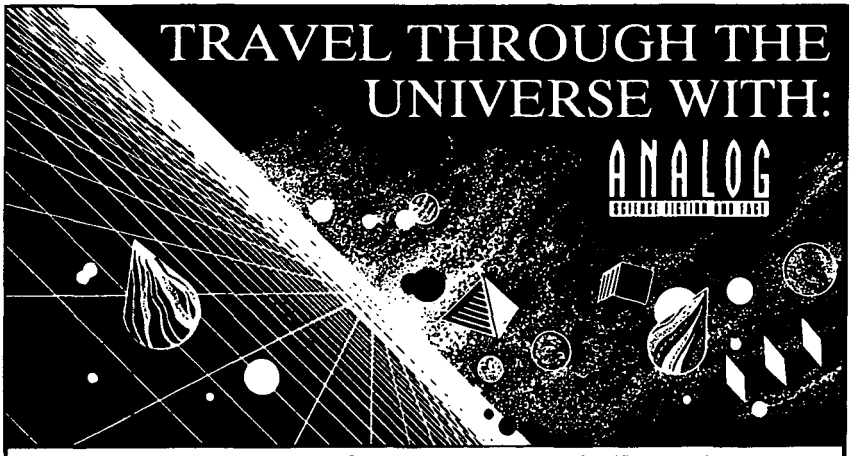

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of the bathroom, a new thought struck her. Did he send them away before he saw the artifact, or afterward? Has he even seen it? Perhaps . . .

Then she saw her reflection in the mirror above the wash basin. Her heart sank. Once she had been called regal, stately, a goddess made of copper. Now she looked withered, dried up, bone thin, her face a geological map of too many years of living, her flight overalls hanging limply on her emaciated frame.

You are old, she said to her image. Old and aching and tired.

It is the long trip, she told herself. You need to rest. But the other voice in her mind laughed scornfully. You've done nothing but rest for the entire time it's taken to reach this piece of rock. You are ready for the permanent rest; why deny it?

She had been teaching at the university on Luna, the closest she could get to Earth after a long lifetime of living in low-gravity environments. Close enough to see the world of her birth, the only world of life and warmth in the solar system, the only place where a person could walk out in the sunshine and feel its warmth soaking your bones, smell the fertile earth nurturing its bounty, feel a cool breeze plucking at your hair.

But she had separated herself from Earth permanently. She had stood at the shore of Titan's methane sea; from an orbiting spacecraft she had watched the surging clouds of Jupiter swirl their overpowering colors; she had carved the kilometer-long rock of The Rememberer. But she could no longer stand in the village of her birth, at the edge of the Pacific's booming surf, and watch the soft white clouds form shapes of imaginary animals.

Her creative life was long finished. She had lived too long; there were no friends left, and she had never had a family. There was no purpose to her life, no reason to do anything except go through the motions and wait. At the university she was no longer truly working at her art but helping students who had the fires of inspiration burning fresh and hot inside them. Her life was one of vain regrets for all the things she had not accomplished, for all the failures she could recall. Failures at love; those were the bitterest. She was praised as the solar system's greatest artist: the sculptress of The Rememberer, the creator of the first great ionospheric painting, The Virgin of the Andes. She was respected, but not loved. She felt empty, alone, barren. She had nothing to look forward to; absolutely nothing.

Then Miles Sterling swept into her existence. A lifetime younger, bold, vital, even ruthless, he stormed her academic tower with the news that an alien artifact had been discovered deep in the asteroid belt.

"It's some kind of art form," he said, desperate with excitement. "You've got to come with me and see it."

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Trying to control the long-forgotten longing that stirred within her, Elverda had asked quietly, "Why do I have to go with you, Mr. Sterling? Why me? I'm an old wo—"

"You are the greatest artist of our time," he had snapped. "You've *got* to see this! Don't bullshit me with false modesty. You're the only other person in the whole whirling solar system who *deserves* to see it!"

"The only other person besides whom?" she had asked.

He had blinked with surprise. "Why, besides me, of course."

So now we are on this nameless asteroid, waiting to see the alien artwork. Just the three of us. The richest man in the solar system. An elderly artist who has outlived her usefulness. And a cyborg soldier who has cleared everyone else away.

He claims to be a priest, Elverda remembered. A priest who is half machine. She shivered as if a cold wind surged through her.

A harsh buzzing noise interrupted her thoughts. Looking into the main part of the room, Elverda saw that the phone screen was blinking red in rhythm to the buzzing.

"Phone," she called out.

Sterling's face appeared on the screen instantly. "Come to my quarters," he said. "We have to talk."

"Give me an hour. I need—"

"Now."

Elverda felt her brows rise haughtily. Then the strength sagged out of her. He has bought the right to command you, she told herself. He is quite capable of refusing to allow you to see the artifact.

"Now," she agreed.

Sterling was pacing across the plush carpeting when she arrived at his quarters. He had changed from his flight coveralls to a comfortably loose royal blue pullover and expensive genuine twill slacks. As the doors slid shut behind her, he stopped in front of a low couch and faced her squarely.

"Do you know who this Dorn creature is?"

Elverda answered, "Only what he has told us."

"I've checked him out. My staff in the ship has a complete file on him. He's the butcher who led the *Chrysalis* massacre, fourteen years ago."

"He . . . "

"Eleven hundred men, women and children. Slaughtered. He was the man who commanded the attack."

"He said he had been a soldier."

"A mercenary. A cold-blooded murderer. He was working for Toyama then. The *Chrysalis* was their habitat. When its population voted for independence, Toyama put him in charge of a squad to bring them back into line. He killed them all; turned off their air and let them all die."

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Elverda felt shakily for the nearest chair and sank into it. Her legs seemed to have lost all their strength.

"His name was Harbin then. Dorik Harbin."

"Wasn't he brought to trial?"

"No. He ran away. Disappeared. I always thought Toyama helped to hide him. They take care of their own, they do. He must have changed his name afterwards. Nobody would hire the butcher, not even Toyama."

"His face . . . half his body . . ." Elverda felt terribly weak, almost faint. "When . . . ?"

"Must have been after he ran away. Maybe it was an attempt to disguise himself."

"And now he is working for you." She wanted to laugh at the irony of it, but did not have the strength.

"He's got us trapped on this chunk of rock! There's nobody else here except the three of us."

"You have your staff in your ship. Surely they would come if you summoned them."

"His security squad's been ordered to keep everybody except you and me off the asteroid. He gave those orders."

"You can countermand them, can't you?"

For the first time since she had met Miles Sterling, he looked unsure of himself. "I wonder," he said.

"Why?" Elverda asked. "Why is he doing this?"

"That's what I intend to find out." Sterling strode to the phone console. "Harbin!" he called. "Dorik Harbin. Come to my quarters at once."

Without even an eyeblink's delay the phone's computer-synthesized voice replied, "Dorik Harbin no longer exists. Transferring your call to Dorn."

Sterling's blue eyes snapped at the phone's blank screen.

"Dorn is not available at present," the phone's voice said. "He will call for you in eleven hours and thirty-two minutes."

"God-*damn* it!" Sterling smacked a fist into the open palm of his other hand. "Get me the officer on watch aboard the *Sterling Eagle*."

"All exterior communications are inoperable at the present time," replied the phone.

"That's impossible!"

"All exterior communications are inoperable at the present time," the phone repeated, unperturbed.

Sterling stared at the empty screen, then turned slowly toward Elverda. "He's cut us off. We're really trapped here."

Elverda felt the chill of cold metal clutching at her. Perhaps Dorn is a madman, she thought. Perhaps he is my death, personified.

"We've got to do something!" Sterling nearly shouted.

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Elverda rose shakily to her feet. "There is nothing that we can do, for the moment. I am going to my quarters and take a nap. I believe that Dorn, or Harbin, or whatever his identity is, will call on us when he is ready to."

"And do what?"

"Show us the artifact," she replied, silently adding, I hope.

Legally, the artifact and the entire asteroid belonged to Sterling Enterprises, Ltd. It had been discovered by a family—husband, wife, and two sons, ages five and three—that made a living from searching out iron-nickel asteroids and selling the mining rights to the big corporations. They filed their claim to this unnamed asteroid, together with a preliminary description of its ten-kilometer-wide shape, its orbit within the asteroid belt, and a sample analysis of its surface composition.

Six hours after their original transmission reached the commodities market computer network on Earth—while a fairly spirited bidding was going on among four major corporations for the asteroid's mineral rights—a new message arrived at the headquarters of the International Astronautical Authority, in London. The message was garbled, fragmentary, obviously made in great haste and at fever excitement. There was an artifact of some sort in a cavern deep inside the asteroid.

One of the faceless bureaucrats buried deep within the IAA's multilayered organization sent an immediate message to an employee of Sterling Enterprises, Ltd. The bureaucrat retired hours later, richer than he had any right to expect, while Miles Sterling personally contacted the prospectors and bought the asteroid outright for enough money to end their prospecting days forever. By the time the decision-makers in the IAA realized that an alien artifact had been discovered they were faced with a *fait accompli:* the artifact, and the asteroid in which it resided, were the personal property of the richest man in the solar system.

Miles Sterling was no egomaniac. Nor was he a fool. Graciously he allowed the IAA to organize a team of scientists who would inspect this first specimen of alien existence. Even more graciously, Sterling offered to ferry the scientific investigators all the long way to the asteroid at his own expense. He made only one demand, and the IAA could hardly refuse him. He insisted that he see this artifact himself before the scientists were allowed to view it.

And he brought along the solar system's most honored and famous artist. To appraise the artifact's worth as an art object, he claimed. To determine how much he could deduct from his corporate taxes by donating the thing to the IAA, said his enemies. But over the months of their voyage to the asteroid, Elverda came to the conclusion that buried deep beneath his ruthless business *persona* was an eager little boy who was

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tremendously excited at having found a new toy. A toy he intended to possess for himself. An art object, created by alien hands.

For an art object was what the artifact seemed to be. The family of prospectors continued to send back vague, almost irrational reports of what the artifact looked like. The reports were worthless. No two descriptions matched. If the man and woman were to be believed, the artifact did nothing but sit in the middle of a rough-hewn cavern. But they described it differently with every report they sent. It glowed with light. It was darker than deep space. It was a statue of some sort. It was formless. It overwhelmed the senses. It was small enough almost to pick up in one hand. It made the children laugh happily. It frightened their parents. When they tried to photograph it, their transmissions showed nothing but blank screens. Totally blank.

As Sterling listened to their maddening reports and waited impatiently for the IAA to organize its hand-picked team of scientists, he ordered his security manager to get a squad of hired personnel to the asteroid as quickly as possible. From corporate facilities on Titan and the moons of Mars, from three separate outposts among the asteroid belt itself, Sterling Enterprises efficiently brought together a brigade of experienced mercenary security troops. They reached the asteroid long before anyone else could, and were under orders to make certain that no one was allowed on the asteroid before Miles Sterling himself reached it.

"The time has come."

Elverda woke slowly, painfully, like a swimmer struggling for the air and light of the surface. She had been dreaming of her childhood, of the village where she had grown up, the distant snow-capped Andes, the warm night breezes that spoke of love.

"The time has come."

It was Dorn's deep voice, whisper-soft. Startled, she flashed her eyes open. She was alone in the room, but Dorn's image filled the phone screen by her bed. The numbers glowing beneath the screen showed that it was indeed time.

"I am awake now," she said to the screen.

"I will be at your door in fifteen minutes," Dorn said. "Will that be enough time for you to prepare yourself?"

"Yes, plenty." The days when she needed time for selecting her clothes and arranging her appearance were long gone.

"In fifteen minutes, then."

"Wait," she blurted. "Can you see me?"

"No. Visual transmission must be keyed manually."

"I see."

"I do not."

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A joke? Elverda sat up on the bed as Dorn's image winked out. Is he capable of humor?

She shrugged out of the shapeless coveralls she had worn to bed, took a quick shower, and pulled her best caftan from the travel bag. It was a deep midnight blue, scattered with glittering silver stars. Elverda had made the floor-length gown herself, from fabric woven by her mother long ago. She had painted the stars from her memory of what they had looked like from her native village.

As she slid back her front door she saw Dorn marching down the corridor with Sterling beside him. Despite his longer legs, Sterling seemed to be scampering like a child to keep up with Dorn's steady, solid steps.

"I *demand* that you reinstate communications with my ship," Sterling was saying, his voice echoing off the corridor walls. "I'll dock your pay for every minute this insubordination continues!"

"It is a security measure," Dorn said calmly, without turning to look at the man. "It is for your own good."

"My own good? Who in hell are you to determine what my own good might be?"

Dorn stopped three paces short of Elverda, made a stiff little bow to her, and only then turned to face his employer.

"Sir: I have seen the artifact. You have not."

"And that makes you better than me?" Sterling almost snarled the words. "Holier, maybe."

"No," said Dorn. "Not holier. Wiser."

Sterling started to reply, then thought better of it.

"Which way do we go?" Elverda asked in the sudden silence.

Dorn pointed with his prosthetic hand. "Down," he replied. "This way."

The corridor abruptly became a rugged tunnel again, with lights fastened at precisely spaced intervals along the low ceiling. Elverda watched Dorn's half-human face as the pools of shadow chased the highlights glinting off the etched metal, like the Moon racing through its phases every half-minute, over and again.

Sterling had fallen silent as they followed the slanting tunnel downward into the heart of the rock. Elverda heard only the clicking of his shoes at first, but by concentrating she was able to make out the softer footfalls of Dorn's padded boots and even the whisper of her own slippers.

The air seemed to grow warmer, closer. *Or is it my own anticipation?* She glanced at Sterling; perspiration beaded his upper lip. The man radiated tense expectation. Dorn glided a few steps ahead of them. He did not seem to be hurrying, yet he was now leading them down the tunnel, like an ancient priest leading two new acolytes—or sacrificial victims.

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The tunnel ended in a smooth wall of dull metal.

"We are here."

"Open it up," Sterling demanded.

"It will open itself," replied Dorn. He waited a heartbeat, then added, "Now."

And the metal slid up into the rock above them as silently as if it were a curtain made of silk.

None of them moved. Then Dorn slowly turned toward the two of them and gestured with his human hand.

"The artifact lies twenty-two point nine meters beyond this point. The tunnel narrows and turns to the right. The chamber is large enough to accommodate only one person at a time, comfortably."

"Me first!" Sterling took a step forward.

Dorn stopped him with an upraised hand. The prosthetic hand. "I feel it my duty to caution you—"

Sterling tried to push the hand away; he could not budge it.

"When I first crossed this line, I was a soldier. After I saw the artifact I gave up my life."

"And became a self-styled priest. So what?"

"The artifact can change you. I thought it best that there be no witnesses to your first viewing of it, except for this gifted woman whom you have brought with you. When you first see it, it can be—traumatic."

Sterling's face twisted with a mixture of anger and disgust. "I'm not a mercenary killer. I don't have anything to be afraid of."

Dorn let his hand drop to his side with a faint whine of miniaturized servomotors.

"Perhaps not," he murmured, so low that Elverda barely heard it.

Sterling shouldered his way past the cyborg. "Stay here," he told Elverda. "You can see it when I come back."

He hurried down the tunnel, footsteps staccato.

Then silence.

Elverda looked at Dorn. The human side of his face seemed utterly weary.

"You have seen the artifact more than once, haven't you?"

"Fourteen times," he answered.

"It has not harmed you in any way, has it?"

He hesitated, then replied, "It has changed me. Each time I see it, it changes me more."

"You . . . you really are Dorik Harbin?"

"I was."

"Those people of the *Chrysalis* . . . ?"

"Dorik Harbin killed them all. Yes. There is no excuse for it, no pardon. It was the act of a monster."

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"But why?"

"Monsters do monstrous things. Dorik Harbin ingested psychotropic drugs to increase his battle prowess. Afterward, when the battle drugs cleared from his bloodstream and he understood what he had done, Dorik Harbin held a grenade against his chest and set it off."

"Oh my god," Elverda whimpered.

"He was not allowed to die, however. The medical specialists rebuilt his body and he was given a false identity. For many years he lived a sham of life, hiding from the authorities, hiding from his own guilt. He no longer had the courage to kill himself; the pain of his first attempt was far stronger than his own self-loathing. Then he was hired to come to this place. Dorik Harbin looked upon the artifact for the first time, and his true identity emerged at last."

Elverda heard a scuffling sound, like feet dragging, staggering. Miles Sterling came into view, tottering, leaning heavily against the wall of the tunnel, slumping as if his legs could no longer hold him.

"No man . . . no one . . . " He pushed himself forward and collapsed into Dorn's arms.

"Destroy it!" he whispered harshly, spittle dribbling down his chin. "Destroy this whole damned piece of rock! Wipe it out of existence!"

"What is it?" Elverda asked. "What did you see?"

Dorn lowered him to the ground gently. Sterling's feet scrabbled against the rock as if he were trying to run away. Sweat covered his face, soaked his shirt.

"It's . . beyond . . . " he babbled. "More . . . than anyone can . . . nobody could stand it. . . ."

Elverda sank to her knees beside him. "What has happened to him?" She looked up at Dorn, who knelt on Sterling's other side.

"The artifact."

Sterling suddenly ranted, "They'll find out about me! Everyone will know! It's got to be destroyed! Nuke it! Blast it to bits!" His fists windmilled in the air, his eyes were wild.

"I tried to warn him," Dorn said as he held Sterling's shoulders down, the man's head in his lap. "I tried to prepare him for it."

"What did he see?" Elverda's heart was pounding; she could hear it thundering in her ears. "What is it? What did *you* see?"

Dorn shook his head slowly. "I cannot describe it. I doubt that anyone could describe it—except, perhaps, an artist: a person who has trained herself to see the truth."

"The prospectors—they saw it. Even their children saw it."

"Yes. When I arrived here they had spent eighteen days in the chamber. They left it only when the chamber closed itself. They ate and slept and returned here, as if hypnotized."

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"It did not hurt them, did it?"

"They were emaciated, dehydrated. It took a dozen of my strongest men to remove them to my ship. Even the children fought us."

"But . . . how could . . . " Elverda's voice faded into silence. She looked at the brightly-lit tunnel. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Destroy it," Sterling mumbled. "Destroy it before it destroys us! Don't let them find out. They'll know, they'll know, they'll all know." He began to sob uncontrollably.

"You do not have to see it," Dorn said to Elverda. "You can return to your ship and leave this place."

Leave, urged a voice inside her head. Run away. Live out what's left of your life and let it go.

Then she heard her own voice say, as if from a far distance, "I've come such a long way."

"It will change you," he warned.

"Will it release me from life?"

Dorn glanced down at Sterling, still muttering darkly, then returned his gaze to Elverda.

"It will change you," he repeated.

Elverda forced herself to her feet. Leaning one hand against the warm rock wall to steady herself, she said, "I will see it. I must."

"Yes," said Dorn, "I understand."

She looked down at him, still kneeling with Sterling's head resting in his lap. Dorn's electronic eye glowed red in the shadows. His human eye was hidden in darkness.

He said, "I believe your people say, *Vaya con Díos*."

Elverda smiled at him. She had not heard that phrase in forty years. "Yes. You too. *Vaya con Díos*." She turned and stepped across the faint groove where the metal door had met the floor.

The tunnel sloped downward only slightly. It turned sharply to the right, Elverda saw, just as Dorn had told them. The light seemed brighter beyond the turn, pulsating almost, like a living heart.

She hesitated a moment before making that final turn. What lay beyond? What difference, she answered herself. You have lived so long that you have emptied life of all its purpose. But she knew she was lying to herself. Her life was devoid of purpose because she herself had made it that way. She had spurned love; she had even rejected friendship when it had been offered. Still, she realized that she wanted to live. Desperately, she wanted to continue living no matter what.

Yet she could not resist the lure. Straightening her spine, she stepped boldly around the bend in the tunnel.

The light was so bright it hurt her eyes. She raised a hand to her brow

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to shield them and the intensity seemed to decrease slightly, enough to make out the faint outline of a form, a shape, a person. . . .

Elverda gasped with recognition. A few meters before her, close enough to reach and touch, her mother sat on the sweet grass beneath the warm summer sun, gently rocking her baby and crooning softly to it.

Mama! she cried silently. Mama. The baby—Elverda herself—looked up into her mother's face and smiled.

And the mother was Elverda, a young and radiant Elverda, smiling down at the baby she had never had, tender and loving as she had never been.

Something gave way inside her. There was no pain; rather, it was as if a pain that had throbbed sullenly within her for too many years to count suddenly faded away. As if a wall of implacable ice finally melted and let the warm waters of life flow through her.

Elverda sank to the floor, crying, gushing tears of understanding and relief and gratitude. Her mother smiled at her.

"I love you, Mama," she whispered. "I love you."

Her mother nodded and became Elverda herself once more. Her baby made a gurgling laugh of pure happiness, fat little feet waving in the air.

The image wavered, dimmed, and slowly faded into emptiness. Elverda sat on the bare rock floor in utter darkness, feeling a strange serenity and understanding warming her soul.

"Are you all right?"

Dorn's voice did not startle her. She had been expecting him to come to her.

"The chamber will close itself in another few minutes," he said. "We will have to leave."

Elverda took his offered hand and rose to her feet. She felt strong, fully in control of herself.

The tunnel outside the chamber was empty.

"Where is Sterling?"

"I sedated him and then called in a medical team to take him back to his ship."

"He wants to destroy the artifact," Elverda said.

"That will not be possible," said Dorn. "I will bring the IAA scientists here from the ship before Sterling awakes and recovers. Once they see the artifact they will not allow it to be destroyed. Sterling may own the asteroid, but the IAA will exert control over the artifact."

"The artifact will affect them—strangely."

"No two of them will be affected in the same manner," said Dorn. "And none of them will permit it to be damaged in any way."

"Sterling will not be pleased with you."

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He gestured up the tunnel, and they began to walk back toward their quarters.

"Nor with you," Dorn said. "We both saw him babbling and blubbering like a baby."

"What could he have seen?"

"What he most feared. His whole life had been driven by fear, poor man."

"What secrets he must be hiding!"

"He hid them from himself. The artifact showed him his own true nature."

"No wonder he wants it destroyed."

"He cannot destroy the artifact, but he will certainly want to destroy us. Once he recovers his composure he will want to wipe out the witnesses who saw his reaction to it."

Elverda knew that Dorn was right. She watched his face as they passed beneath the lights, watched the glint of the etched metal, the warmth of the human flesh.

"You knew that he would react this way, didn't you?" she asked.

"No one could be as rich as he is without having demons driving him. He looked into his own soul and recognized himself for the first time in his life."

"You planned it this way!"

"Perhaps I did," he said. "Perhaps the artifact did it for me."

"How could—"

"It is a powerful experience. After I had seen it a few times I felt it was offering me . . . " he hesitated, then spoke the word, "salvation."

Elverda saw something in his face that Dorn had not let show before. She stopped in the shadows between overhead lights. Dorn turned to face her, half machine, standing in the rough tunnel of bare rock.

"You have had your own encounter with it," he said. "You understand now how it can transform you."

"Yes," said Elverda. "I understand."

"After a few times, I came to the realization that there must be thousands of my fellow mercenaries, killed in engagements all through the asteroid belt, still lying where they fell. Or worse yet, floating forever in space, alone, unattended, ungrieved for."

"Thousands of mercenaries?"

"The corporations do not always settle their differences in Earthly courts of law," said Dorn. "There have been many battles out here. Wars that we paid for with our blood."

"Thousands?" Elverda repeated. "I knew that there had been occasional fights out here—but wars? I don't think anyone on Earth knows it's been so brutal."

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"Men like Sterling know. They start the wars, and people like me fight them. Exiles, never allowed to return to Earth again once we take the mercenary's pay."

"All those men—killed."

Dorn nodded. "And women. The artifact made me see that it was my duty to find each of those forgotten bodies and give each one a decent final rite. The artifact seemed to be telling me that this was the path of my atonement."

"Your salvation," she murmured.

"I see now, however, that I underestimated the situation."

"How?"

"Sterling. While I am out there searching for the bodies of the slain, he will have me killed."

"No! That's wrong!"

Dorn's deep voice was empty of regret. "It will be simple for him to send a team after me. In the depths of dark space, they will murder me. What I failed to do for myself, Sterling will do for me. He will be my final atonement."

"Never!" Elverda blazed with anger. "I will not permit it to happen."

"Your own life is in danger from him," Dorn said.

"What of it? I am an old woman, ready for death."

"Are you?"

"I was . . . until I saw the artifact."

"Now life is more precious to you, isn't it?"

"I don't want you to die," Elverda said. "You have atoned for your sins. You have borne enough pain."

He looked away, then started up the tunnel again.

"You are forgetting one important factor," Elverda called after him.

Dorn stopped, his back to her. She realized now that the clothes he wore had been his military uniform. He had torn all the insignias and pockets from it.

"The artifact. Who created it? And why?"

Turning back toward her, Dorn answered, "Alien visitors to our solar system created it, unknown ages ago. As to why—you tell me: why does someone create a work of art?"

"Why would aliens create a work of art that affects human minds?"

Dorn's human eye blinked. He rocked a step backward.

"How could they create an artifact that is a mirror to our souls?" Elverda asked, stepping toward him. "They must have known something about us. They must have been here when there were human beings existing on Earth."

Dorn regarded her silently.

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"They may have been here much more recently than you think," Elverda went on, coming closer to him. "They may have placed this artifact here to *communicate* with us."

"Communicate?"

"Perhaps it is a very subtle, very powerful communications device."

"Not an artwork at all."

"Oh yes, of course it's an artwork. All works of art are communications devices, for those who possess the soul to understand."

Dorn seemed to ponder this for long moments. Elverda watched his solemn face, searching for some human expression.

Finally he said, "That does not change my mission, even if it is true."

"Yes it does," Elverda said, eager to save him. "Your mission is to preserve and protect this artifact against Sterling and anyone else who would try to destroy it—or pervert it to his own use."

"The dead call to me," Dorn said solemnly. "I hear them in my dreams now."

"But why be alone in your mission? Let others help you. There must be other mercenaries who feel as you do."

"Perhaps," he said softly.

"Your true mission is much greater than you think," Elverda said, trembling with new understanding. "You have the power to end the wars that have destroyed your comrades, that have almost destroyed your soul."

"End the corporate wars?"

"You will be the priest of this shrine, this sepulcher. I will return to Earth and tell everyone about these wars."

"Sterling and others will have you killed."

"I am a famous artist, they dare not touch me." Then she laughed. "And I am too old to care if they do."

"The scientists—do you think they may actually learn how to communicate with the aliens?"

"Someday," Elverda said. "When our souls are pure enough to stand the shock of their presence."

The human side of Dorn's face smiled at her. He extended his arm and she took it in her own, realizing that she had found her own salvation. Like two kindred souls, like comrades who had shared the sight of death, like mother and son they walked up the tunnel toward the waiting race of humanity. ●

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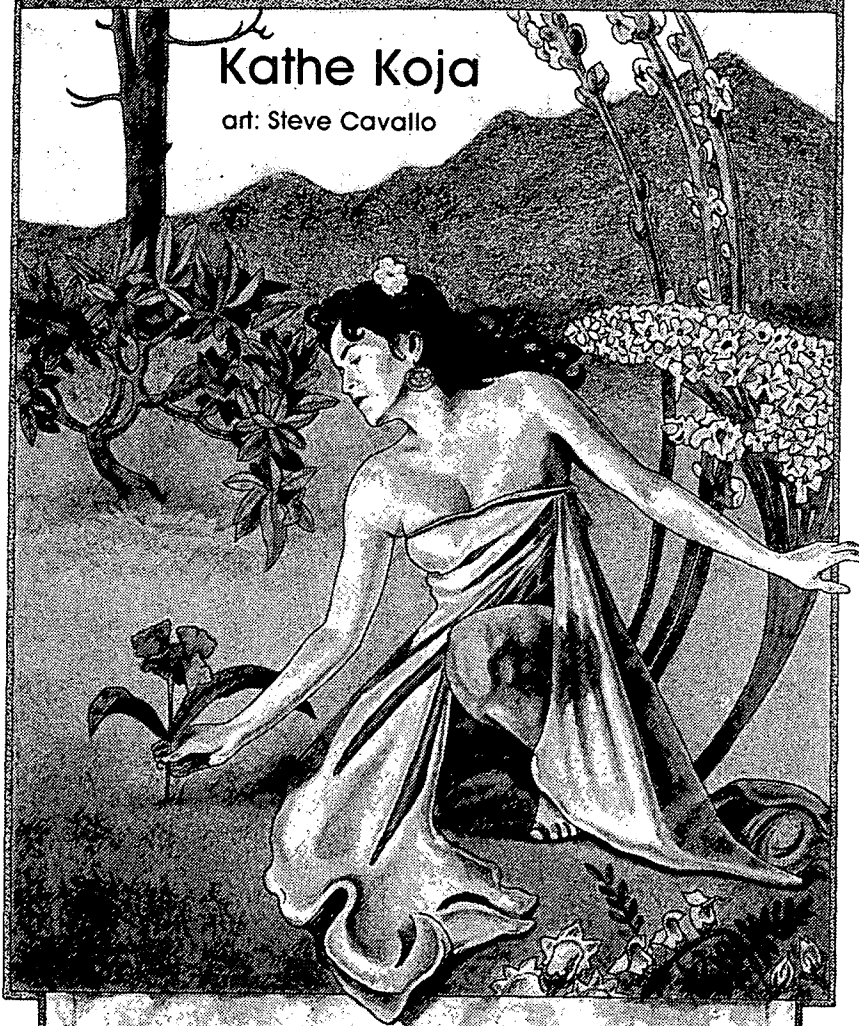
PERSEPHONE

Kathe Koja

art: Steve Cavallo



Kathe Koja's latest novel, *Bad Brains*, was published early this year by Dell/Abyss, and another new book, *Skin*, will appear early in 1993. Ms. Koja is now at work on her next novel, but she tells us she'll take some time out to write a few short stories.

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Half a smile, and she laid the hard black iris in the smooth valley of her breasts, its metallic edge as ragged and sharp as shorn iron. Iron: its smell was everywhere, its dry powdery blood on every surface—the bony floors of her sleeping chamber, the rim of growthless vines before her casement, the deep pebbled casket of a wardrobe, hinges shaped like fangs and fingers; it clung to her very skin like a cosmetic. Her mother had never allowed her the use of cosmetics. Very well, she would use them here.

One hand slowly stropping the flower, back and forth, back and forth, she reached with the other to pour a deeper drink of the curious pale wine, forever available, a colorless plasma tasting of more than grape. Her mother discouraged the drinking of wine, though she was the mother as well of all vineyards, of all that was fertile, that was rich and lush. Back and forth the false flower, as her tongue brushed the wine on her lips, wide dissatisfied lips, deep sulky eyes as dark as the ceilingless walls around her, as opaque as the hangings of the black voluptuous bed, the surface of which twitched, at odd moments, and shuddered, as if in life.

Her name was Persephone, and she had only lately come to Hell.

On the river bank, that day, stretched restless among the virgins whom her mother insisted comprise her retinue; silly girls, their thin high voices as scattered and annoying as the crying of a cage of magpies. Her eyes half-shut against their playful entreaties. Come with us, they cried, gesturing. Come and gather the blooms spread before us by the generous hand of the goddess your mother! And Persephone's cool frown, her fingertips scattering them as she would scatter drops of water. "Go on," she'd said. "Go away."

Alone now, in the moist afternoon heat. Lying back, she raised her skirts, voluminous and white, high against her bare thighs. Beneath her fingers, the violets—her mother's flower—grew small and soft, and with a smile she crushed them, rubbed the heightened sweetness of their destruction against her pale palm, then dusted them gone, to lie in mournful scatter beside her. A breeze began, shivering through the grass. She raised her skirts higher still to let it stroke her, pooled them like eddied light almost about her waist. Such a small waist she had, and such heavy breasts, for a child your age, her mother said. Her mother! She would keep her a child forever, a baby groping blind, smothering her in these gowns as an infant in its swaddle. All in its season, her mother said.

From far off she heard the giggling voices of her attendants, and, in pouting irritation, sprawled flat to watch the dash and ripple of the leaves in the freshening breeze. But to her surprise the leaves did not

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move, seemed untouched by that wind she felt so plainly on her face, the hills of her shoulders and breasts, the slope of her thighs. Slowly she raised herself, listening for that which troubled the air.

Nothing.

And still, the breeze. Gaining now into a wind that stroked and tangled her unbraided hair, black hair, a bluish sheen there in the damp shade, and now she rose to her knees, certain she heard something, not her maidens, not the sparse sounds of the receding forest around her. But *something.*

Coming through the trees.

She was nearly to her feet when the very ground began to tremble, like an animal frightened by storms, the wind burst to gale, and a chariot thrust like thunder through the last of the forest, an iron chariot, wild horses as black as her hair, horses with the eyes of men. About their necks thrashed and shivered the iron reins, loose in the hands of their master.

Who stood for a long and silent moment, considering her as she stood craning back, staring up at him with frankest interest. Dressed helmetless in black, some eerie armor that moved with his own smallest motion, tall, so tall and hard with muscle, with sinew and long bone. Hair as black as her own lay unbound, down past those heavy shoulders, stirred now with a slow snake's motion as if touched by invisible heat. The long lips expressionless and still, the gaze of pale eyes, as blank as a beautiful reptile's, moving slowly, slowly, over her body, bringing with it the flush of familiarity, of being known by more than sight.

Without word or sound, he reached out and down to put those long hands about her waist, his fingers shockingly hot and solid as burning stone as Persephone twisted, less in struggle than sheer excitement, her feet uncertain on the moving floor of the chariot that leaped forward as soon as she was inside.

The horses needed no guidance or urging; they knew whence they were bound. Through the thinning forest at speed that seemed incredible, Persephone, hair whipped and blinding, watched with half a glance the stuttering line of passing trees, the grasses, the heaps and tumbles of flowers as the chariot neared, then reached the riverbank. Her dark captor, one arm still in possessive clasp, used the other to strike with his razored trident, once and once only on the timid earth, which on the instant responded with space enough for the chariot to pass.

And now in darkness, the only sound the metronomic throb of the horses' hooves and the grind of the speeding wheels. Only then did Persephone stir, turning lightly in his touch as a wrist turns beneath a heavy bracelet, to look again into his eyes. Snake's eyes, on hers, and the body beside her one black emanation, like standing too close to a brazier, a

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flame, a fire. Through her mouth she breathed in—his heat inside her now—and made as if to speak, but he nodded, indicating their descent, and she saw before her the wide and ancient slope of darkness culminating in the banks of the Styx, where blind Charon waited with his decrepit boat, his rotted grin that no amusement could summon. Raising one arm in salute to his master, he turned as if to watch their passing, Persephone's white gown fluttering back like the departing shades of the dead.

Past mountains higher than any on the earth above, capped not with snow but some charcoal crust, through clouds like storms, past countless panoramas of mortal torment, and caves where the things inside smirked and blinked to acknowledge their passing, all of it kaleidoscopic and suffused for Persephone with the sanguinary light of excitement, her heart beating as fast as the chariot's wheels, beating so that she could see the shiver of its pounding in the fabric over her breast. Her captor as well glimpsed that shiver, and reached to cover it with the heavy palm of his hand, pressing hard against her flesh as if to brand it, so. And Persephone closed her eyes, to know the touch more deeply.

Her apartments were enclosed by a mazelike drift of stone and iron, but, once inside, she was astonished by the endless black grandeur, the sheer opulence of the rooms. The walls rose up and up, their ceiling obscured by the drift of the heavy clouds, neither precisely moisture nor smoke, that seemed to rise everywhere above the landscape. In her bedchamber proper there was much to admire: hangings depicting the many triumphs of the Prince of Hell, casements from which she could survey the kingdom, a curious mirror that reflected more than that which stood before it: scenes of pain, scenes of sorrow and cold loss. And scenes of passion.

"It is a pretty conceit," she said, trying to sound blasé, although she could not take her gaze from the mirror's surface, where a man and woman lay engaged in hot and singular combat. "Wherever did—"

The Prince did not smile, but she felt his lips move as he pressed them atop hers, as his hard hands cupped her breasts and worked roughly against the fabric, kneading with his thumbs. His kiss was dry, but his mouth was warm, very warm, so warm that when he stepped away—after how long?—she felt as if her body was burning, burning inside.

"I will have refreshment sent to you," he said, the first time she had heard his voice. Low, with a peculiar gravel, as if unused to speaking much. He left her there, before the mirror. She leaned half in and half out the casement, hair stirred by the windless breeze, to watch his departure, the lingering looks of the horses, the chariot's whipcrack motion as it pulled off into the dark.

The pale wine, pale as his eyes, tasted much better than it looked;

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Persephone drank and drank, never reaching the bottom of the elegant pitcher, as curved and shaped as bone, whitest bone like some hero's skull. Besides the wine there was a bowl of fruit, blackapples and pomegranates and big bloated dates that smelled far too sweet when she sniffed them. The wine had dulled her hunger, had produced instead a perverse and tipsy humor that set her sorting through the gowns in the wardrobe, incredible gowns, almost obscenely rich, and far finer than any she had ever owned and she the daughter of a queen, a goddess; a goddess herself, one day. Well, she need not wait for royalty, she was queen here already. Wine in hand, she stripped, the air not cool on her bare body, instead warm, insinuating, dry. She began to try on the gowns, posing before the mirror.

Here a black silk, cut indecently low in the bodice, tight almost to the hips; and as she dressed, the mirror showed a woman dancing, shedding first clothes, then skin, then flesh, until she was a clacking whirl of bones, only her long yellow hair still lusciously intact. Here a gown made of something like satin, bright as fresh blood, ornamented in thick clumps of gold, molten gold frozen somehow to clotted filigree. This one had no back or sleeves at all, barely covered the tips of her breasts. In the mirror, a man and two women began with kissing, and, through escalations each more bizarre than the preceding, ended in an orgy of hot devourment, only scraps and shreds left to indicate to the viewer the wild folly of such hunger. Persephone, the gown pooled at her waist, watched to the finish their moist gyrations, a pale dew of sweat at her hairline, in the spaces beneath her breasts.

Tiring at last of the dresses, her head a-spin with the unaccustomed wine, she took the goblet to bed with her and lay sipping till she slept, hair spread and tangled over the heavy mound of black pillows, no coverlet at all because she was warm, so warm, all over. And in sleep she dreamed, restless fancies of a lover as dark as the room around her, who would bring her kisses to sting like liquid fire.

Hell was, if not a pleasant, then certainly an instructive place. During her first days there, Persephone learned many things. Although she did not see the Prince, she was rarely bored—itself a surprising state, for Persephone was easily made bored.

Exploring the confines of her apartments, and then the manor in which they were housed, took most of a day—or a day as she guessed it, for here there were no clock-candles, no hourglasses, no sun to separate morning from midnight. Only the perpetual twilight, the smokes, the darkness going on and on. Indoors was the same as out, everything subsumed by that same darkness. She learned to squint her eyes against the thickest vapors, to carry a handkerchief, scented from a black jar she

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found on a shelf in her wardrobe, to avoid the bad-tempered Charon, and to tease dog Cerberus cautiously, if at all.

So much to see! She found she enjoyed the aspects of barrenness, the empty vistas, as much or more than the green fields and cool forests of her mother's dominion. Everything was so different here, isolated so absolutely from the world above it that it was as if that world did not exist, or, if it did, that it was worthy of little notice and none at all from her.

She moved through Hell unmolested but not unnoticed. Swishing the skirts of the black silk gown, her silver sandals twinkling pert against the split and bloody stones, she examined all that interested her, piqued by the squalor, mocking the sufferings she saw with the cool intolerance of one who has never been unhappy and cannot fathom why those who are should be aided or pitied. Ixion at his wheel, the Danaides with their sieve, felt her mockery; before Tantalus she called for wine, and, after sipping half the goblet, spilled the rest at his feet, dipped one toe in the puddle, and smiled. She lounged atop the hill of Sisyphus and applauded the boulder's inexorable downward roll. To Priapus she exposed herself, stripping down the black bodice, hands cupped beneath her breasts in scornful display, then, in leaving, tweaked his thick and painful tool, wondering as she did if the Prince himself was so heavily endowed. In the shadow of the vulture's wings, she observed with passionless curiosity Prometheus' endless torments, then strolled away to other diversions. Punishment, what was it to her? She who had never been punished, barely faulted, for anything she had ever done, no matter its cruelty or hurt. Instead she reveled in it all: The grand tour of Hell and she its only wanderer, flirting with the demons, flirting with the pains, finding within herself an unsuspected and not unwelcome taste for the brutal, yet finding also, as the hours spun past on a living strand of blackness, an ache for different pleasures, games she could not play alone.

Back in her apartments, she waited before the window, fancying each unknown sound as the approaching churn of chariot wheels, waited until her slender fund of patience was devoured by the passing minutes. Pouring a sloppy goblet's worth of wine, she drank the same in a series of breathless swallows, then stripped before the mirror, comparing her own heavy breasts, slick thighs, to those of the women she saw reflected there, pausing despite herself to watch in sullen astonishment the moist voluptuousities, those women, their masked and groaning men. In sudden petulant temper, Persephone hurled her goblet at them, at their smug enjoyment of what she did not have; the mirror's surface shuddered once, very hard, before absorbing without breaking the shock of impact, which made her angrier still.

"Am I to waste away in boredom?" she demanded of the mirror, across

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which suddenly flamed like sheet lighting the reflection not only of the fornicating couples, of her reddened face, her pouting lip, but of a shadow, impossibly long and black, come unseen and stretched behind her in the smaller shadows of the room.

"Have you tired of Hell," closer now, "already?"

The air around her grew warmer, rich with a sweet corrosion, or was it her own inner heat? Rapt with the motion of his approach, for once she said nothing, all patience now, able to wait now as that warmth swept her body, bared by the fallen gown. From neck to knees he surveyed her, and she swiveled like a wanton, displaying herself far more boldly than she had before the hapless Priapus, stroking the flesh she knew must lure him with hands that trembled, far away in the burning centers of their bones.

"Are its pleasures no temptations?" said the Prince, close enough, now, to touch, though he did not. "Its temptations no pleasures?"

"*You* please me," Persephone said, her voice strangely muted in his shadow. "And I would fain please you."

His touch, then, was like the stroke and hiss of molten metal; his breath in her mouth was living iron. Lifting her, one-armed, with the other he swept the draperies of the bed aside, then stripped to stand before her as she had before him, but with a pitiless confidence her movements had not begun to own. Already he was rampant, and, she saw with a flush of gratification, far larger than Priapus.

"You are truly a Prince," she said, and his smile was fire, she felt its heat as at last he joined her on the shivering bed, struck her limbs with his hunger, scored her flesh with fingers that pulled and pinched, tussled the pink skin of her breasts with teeth as sharp, and sharply demanding, as that of a starved animal. When their coupling had reached at last past climax to exhaustion, the bed and its drapings were blood-dappled, a poppyfield, blood too on the pulpy droop of her lower lip, swollen now to a smile. He knelt between her sore spread thighs, kneading the muscles there with a concentration that might have frightened her had she not been past all feeling but satiation, then bent to snap once, twice, at her still-stiffened nipples.

"Oh, little Princess," he said, the last a hiss like steam. "I was not mistaken in you."

They lay abed for hours, half dozing, his arms crooked about her neck like twin vises, her hair wrapped and knotted around his throat like hangman's hemp. They drank rivers of the pale wine, the origin of which she teased to discover, his lazy indulgence offering only that its base lay in the tears of mourners, its saddening piquancy a secret known only to the master of Hell's distillery.

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"Then I will go there," Persephone said pertly, and made as if to rise, instanter his grasp pulling her down again.

"You will go where I tell you," kiss like a growl, "and nowhere else."

She turned, as much as she was able in that punishing embrace, to make her rejoinder, but before the words could leave her lips, the bedchamber door struck open, and there on its threshold was the god Mercury, the feathers at his heels still vibrating with the speed of his passage, and just behind him—Persephone's lips in a smile startled wide—her *mother,* Ceres, one hand hard on the golden crop she used on her team of dragons, the flowers in her riverine auburn hair wilting, now, from the haste, from the arid heat.

"*This* is a sight!" she shouted, and her voice was the sound of gales, daughter of hurricanes and winds to topple the walls of a thousand temples. "Come I am from Olympus to demand your release, and find you sporting like a common slut!"

Persephone wisely said nothing, though her smile turned to smirk and she made no attempt to hide her nakedness from the appreciative eyes of Mercury, lounging lightly in the door. It was the Prince himself who spoke, each word as waterdrops sizzling on a brazier.

"She is mine, now," he said.

"She is *not,*" said her mother, "she is nothing but a silly bitchlet who needs a hard hand." And, angrier still, her very hair beginning to whip like branches in a storm, "No, don't smile upon her in that doting way, she is pert enough already!"

"Do you not," said the Prince, in a way that stilled the scowl on Ceres's face and sent Mercury a wary half-step from the room, "direct me in my own domain. You are in Hell, Ceres—remember it."

There was silence in the chamber then, a collecting silence at the termination of which Ceres's manner, though still angry, was a notch subdued. "I do remember," she said. "Persephone, get you dressed."

"I am not coming," Persephone said at once, and leaned to give her lover a noisy kiss. His arms tightened about her, suffocatingly so, but her smile never changed. Ceres began to whip the crop, back and forth, back and forth.

"I have searched for you," she said, her voice a thousand fields burning, "till the earth itself lies riven with my seeking, till the mortals ply their dying crops with the paltry rain of their tears. They call out to me, begging me to show pity, but all my pity was for *you*, my lost child. When at last I discovered the abode of your captivity," a cold stare at the lovers, to which Persephone responded by clutching the Prince's arms more tightly about her, "to Jupiter himself did I go, demanding your release."

The Prince's stare was flatter still; nothing showed behind the pale eyes. "And what did he say?"

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The golden crop stripped the face of an embroidered demon from the heavy draperies round the bed. "He said she must return home with me! He—"

"Unless," spoke Mercury from the door, faint shrug to Ceres's she-bear scowl, "young Persephone has taken food, here in the Underworld. If so, then stay she must, for thus the Fates make law."

It seemed to grow hotter in the silent chamber, heat a bubble enclosing them all: the narrow eyes of Ceres's patienceless rage, Mercury's ironic smile, the heavy stare of the Prince beside her. Persephone raised up, and took care to speak directly to her mother.

"Six months," the Prince whispered, the breath of his mouth against the shivering lobe of her ear. "Half a year and back you come, to such black rejoicings as Hell has never seen," and he grabbed at her breasts, one last devouring grasp, as with Ceres's jailer arm about her she rose struggling past the river, past Charon and his boat, past Cerberus, who was struck one brief but damaging blow with the crop's bright handle, past every dark wonder of her Prince's dominion, to the light, to the overwhelming fragrance of a thousand bursting blooms, a hundred hundred blades of grass springing fresh to spearlike growth. All nature welcomed Persephone, her mother's triumph bringing forth green life where none had ever been, causing dry twigs to flower, dead fields to yield up harvest, from seed to fruit in one bright convulsive moment. The chariot-dragons pranced to the music of Ceres's urging, the mortals watching the pageant of their passing bowed so that their gaping mouths touched the newly fertile ground. And the looted daughter, eyes closed, half-ransomed, sat sulky, gowned still in black silk, rimmed and hemmed in the red dust of Hell.

She pouted hard, but in secret fact was not displeased: for there were *two* worlds after all, were there not? And if only one demanding lord beneath, then many lovers in the one above, all of them eager to lie with the daughter of a goddess, a daughter schooled and tempered by the Prince of Hell himself. Pleasantly tired, she lay back at last against the downy, field-scented thatch of the chariot, between her palms the lazy roll of the ripe voluptuous pomegranate, its skin split lightly to reveal the gap wherein had come six missing seeds, whose hasty juice still stained her sated lips. ●

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ELIZABETH I: ON SEEING PERSEPHONE WALK THROUGH THE GATES OF HELL

by M. Shayne Bell

She comes again, Robert—there.
Another half year marked.
But for her, we would not stand here
in any peace.

Have I told you the story?

She came to me, Robert,
when I was lost
among the millions crushing Styx,
and said: "Do something for your people.
Find a way to help them."

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And I lifted up my eyes
and saw this hill.

"I need a staff," I said,
so she brought me one of Charon's
and I set out to climb
through all the clawing thousands
that thronged these slopes,
thousands babbling at me
in the tongues of India and Cathay,
and when I reached the top
the winds blew yet I had nothing
to fly from my staff but my red skirts,
so I tore off a goodly part,
tied that to this staff,
and held it up in the wind
that blew my hair,
and my torn skirts,
and my red flag.
The multitudes rioting along Styx
quieted, and looked at me,
and I shouted: "England stands here."

And they came to me:
my English boys who drowned
fighting Spanish fleets;
my farmers, my generals,
my sturdy village women—
even my poets, even Walter came.
And we made this hill a little England
for the people of all the times of England,
an island of safety,
a refuge of peace and learning
in a sea of unexpected
chaos.

And we stand here yet, Robert.
England yet stands here,
and will, till all the English
have crossed Styx, and I,
the last, will let them greet me
on the other side.

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THE SATANIC ILLUSION

L. Sprague de Camp

This distinguished author's numerous publications include the classic science fiction novels *Lest Darkness Fall* and *Rogue Queen;* wonderful fantasies such as *The Incomplete Enchanter* (with Fletcher Pratt) and *The Undesired Princess;* and *The Great Monkey Trial*—his definitive history of the 1925 Scopes evolution trial in Dayton, Tennessee. A collection of Mr. de Camp's Reggie Rivers stories is forthcoming from Baen Books.

art: Bob Walters

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Yes, Mr. Proctor, we have had trouble with wowsers like that. If you had come by a couple of years ago, you'd have seen a line of pickets outside our office here. The signs they carried denounced the Raja—that is, my partner, Chandra Aiyar—and me as murderers and emissaries of Satan. I was never quite clear as to whether one of us was supposed to be Old Nick himself, and the other an assistant imp. It was a bloody nuisance while it lasted, but I don't think it actually turned away many would-be clients. The blokes who go on time safaris with us are not the sort to let the seven days of Genesis stop them.

All right, I'll tell you the story. It was my turn to man the office while the Raja took a party to the Jurassic. Somehow the hard cases always seem to come up on my watch.

Anyway, one afternoon Miss Minakuchi told me that two clerical gents were here to see me. This was unusual; but I said, send them in. They turned out to be a big, stout one, the Reverend Gilmore Zahn, and a little, skinny one, the Reverend Paul Hubert. I'd heard of Zahn, St. Louis' leading hellfire-and-damnation Fundamentalist preacher. Miss Minakuchi used to cut out newspaper stories in which Zahn made remarks about Rivers and Aiyar as leading souls into unbelief and damnation; but I never paid much attention.

This visit surprised me, as if the leading anti-liquor crusader were to drop in at the headquarters of Schneider's Brewery for a donation. But in business you have to take the rough with the smooth. So I said:

"What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Zahn answered: "We want to go on one of your time safaris, not to hunt, but to look over the landscape and the fauna and flora for various so-called geological eras. I am Gilmore Zahn, and this is my assistant pastor, the Reverend Paul Hubert."

"Pleased to meet you," I said. "I believe the papers have carried some of the remarks you've made in sermons, touching upon my partner's and my business."

"Oh, that." Zahn waved a big, pudgy hand and smiled a big, round smile. "Nothing personal, I do assure you. From all I hear, you are a pillar of the community, a good family man who faithfully performs his civic duties and leads a quiet, normal life. Naturally, there are philosophical differences between us; but that should not preclude a friendly personal relationship."

The big bloke had an ingratiating manner, which made it hard to dislike him. Then the Reverend Hubert spoke:

"We hope you won't mind if this survey ruins your business. What we're trying to do is to nail down the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Eh?" said I. "Why should it ruin our business?"

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He leaned forward, pointing his sharp nose at me as if it were a weapon. "Because it will expose the falsity of the whole evolutionary heresy. It will demonstrate that all these prehistoric beasts, whereof your clients bring home heads, hides, and photographs, did not live in succession, but all at the same time." To emphasize, he slapped my desk with his palm, which I thought a bit of cheek.

"Oh, really?" I said.

"Yes, really," continued Hubert, shaking a finger at me. "It will show that they were created by God all at once, as the Bible says."

"How about all those thousands of extinct forms, of which they have dug up fossils, and which our safaris have seen in the flesh?"

"They are species that couldn't make it to the Ark," said Hubert.

"Calm down, Paul," said Zahn. "Don't get Mr. Rivers' back up. You, sir, can evidently take hunters back to an ancient time—either thousands of years ago, as we believe, or millions of years, as the false religion of scientism claims, to hunt animals that are extinct in the present world. I do not see why you cannot go on doing just that, regardless of the truth or falsity of the evolutionary theory. Will you take us?"

I shook my head. "No, gentlemen, I don't think a time safari of the sort you have in mind is practicable. Too far out of our regular line of work. Besides, the Reverend Hubert looks to me too small a man to take to the Mesozoic."

"What does my size have to do with it?" asked Hubert, bristling.

"Because you're too small to handle the kind of gun that's needed for confronting dinosaurs. The only time we ever lost a client was the result of taking too small a man to the Cretaceous. A tyrannosaur ate him, even after he had pumped it full of .375 magnums."

"We have no intention of hunting or shooting anything," said Zahn. "From what I hear about wildlife, if you leave them alone they will mostly do you the same courtesy. No guns; we shall be quite satisfied to view the dangerous ones at long range, through binoculars. How about it?"

"No, sorry. Our business is to take trophy hunters to periods where they shan't have to worry about endangered species, not to prove theological points."

"Mr. Rivers," said Zahn, "did you or did you not give a talk on time safaris at the West Side YMCA last March?"

"Yes, I did."

"And did you or didn't you say that you wished you could take some of these foolish Fundamentalists back on one of your safaris, so they could see how the world really was in prehistoric times?"

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"Well then," said Zahn, beaming, "here is your opportunity to have

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your wish. I am sure a man with your well-developed Australian sporting instincts would not go back on his word."

At that point, this pair had me by the short and curlies. After some more yabber I said: "Okay, I'll do it, provided you fellows can pay our rates. They're admittedly steep, because Professor Prochaska's time chamber uses fantastic amounts of electric power."

"How much?" asked Zahn.

I told him; and do you know, the big bloke pulled out a checkbook on the spot and wrote me out a check for a quarter of the total as a deposit! I saw that the check was drawn on his church.

I told them we couldn't push off until the Raja got back from the Jurassic; but they were agreeable about time. We set the date of departure tentatively for the following month.

As soon as they had left the office, I went around to the Herald Building and asked a friend who worked on that paper about the finances of Zahn's church. It seemed that these were good, and I started to go to the bank when my journalistic friend, Spencer McMurtrie, detained me.

"Reggie," he said, "if you're really going to take these godlies back in time, to see whose theory wins—evolution or Genesis—I want to go along, too. I think I can get the paper to put up the cash. It'll make a whopping story!"

"Okay," I said, "if you can make the arrangements. Can you shoot? Neither of these preachers intends to carry a gun, and that makes us too lightly armed for comfort."

"Oh, sure," he said.

Later, I took him out to the range and found him a fair shot. Since he didn't own a gun heavy enough for the sort of sightseeing we were doing, I rented him one of our double .600s. On the range, being a stocky, well-set-up bloke, he showed he could handle it.

On the appointed day, we assembled in the time-chamber building. The building belongs to the University, but in fact Prochaska's apparatus and the supporting equipment take up most of it. The preachers were in brand-new khaki safari outfits. The newspapers had sent reporters to see us off, and the man from the *Post-Dispatch* asked:

"Is it true, Mr. Rivers, that the purpose of this expedition is to convert the Reverend Zahn to evolution? I know he'll try to convert you to his brand of Christianity."

"Not exactly," I said. "I'm not trying to convert anyone to anything. I shall simply lay the evidence before him, and he can bloody well draw his own inferences."

The man from the *Globe-Democrat* said: "Why aren't you taking along that train of burros, as you have on some previous safaris?"

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"Because we don't plan to move camp away from the time chamber—merely to make four or five stops in time and spend about a day or two at each one. We shall start with the Devonian and come on down, fifty or a hundred million years at a jump, to the most recent date we're allowed to travel to, the Pliocene."

"Why can't you stop in the Pleistocene, when all those mammoths and things were running around, with cave men chasing them or vice versa?"

"Not allowed," I said. "We might run into one of those blokes and, by interacting with him, change all subsequent history. The universe doesn't allow that sort of paradox."

"Or," put in the Reverend Zahn with his Humpty Dumpty smile, "as I should express it, 'God is not mocked.' Sixth chapter of Galatians."

I went on: "The instant you start to do something that would affect the present, the space-time forces snap you back to Present and bloody well kill you in the process."

"Then you can't actually show the Reverend an ape-man and say: 'There's our ancestor, believe it or not'?"

"No, we can't. Even if we could, those fellows were all in the Old World, and there's no way to move the chamber around the Earth's surface. They didn't get to the Americas until they had already evolved into *Homo sapiens*. Those who came over from Siberia were just Red Indians, as we used to call them. Native Americans, I believe, is the favored term now."

Cohen, the chamber wallah, spoke up: "Reggie, are you and your party ready to go?"

"Half a minute, Bruce," I said. "Any more questions? I'll allow just one more."

"Mr. Rivers," said a man from one of the suburban papers, "aren't you and the Reverends going to do any hunting or trophy collecting?"

"I hunt only with these," said Hubert, pointing to the cameras slung round his neck.

"And I am a hunter, not of beasts, but of souls," said Zahn. "Not that I take this environmentalist nonsense seriously, please understand. As it says in first Genesis: God gave man 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.' If a species of no practical use to man goes extinct, that's no real loss, except to sentimentalists who care more for such creatures than for their fellow men. But I have never hunted in the usual sense and feel no urge to take it up at my time of life."

"Time to go," I said, and set about herding my lambs into the transition chamber. Although we were stripped down to a minimum as regards equipment, it still would take two trips by the chamber to get us all to

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whenever we were going. There were eight of us: me, the two preachers, the journalist, and the support crew, consisting of Beauregard Black the camp boss, two helpers, and Ming the cook. We could have squeezed the eight of us into the chamber all at once, with our packs on our backs; but that would still not leave room for the tents, galley, and other needful equipment for the week in the field I had planned.

The door closed. Cohen pushed buttons, and the machinery whined. "When to, Reggie?" said he.

"Set it for this date, 275 million B.C.," I said. "That should put us into the Devonian."

You understand, Mr. Proctor, that the dates of geological eras are more or less approximate. Likewise there are limits to the accuracy of the time-distorting machinery. Accuracy has greatly improved since Prochaska began his project; but your arrival may still be off by hours or days or even months when you arrive. The farther back you go in time, the greater becomes the margin you have to allow for error.

So Bruce Cohen pushed his buttons and twirled his dials, and the light faded. You've never made a trip in the transition chamber, have you, Mr. Proctor? Thought not. It's a bloody devastating experience the first time, with vibration, vertigo, nausea, and a horrid feeling of being in free fall, even though your conscious mind tells you your feet are firmly planted on the chamber floor.

I must say, the preachers took it well. I've known better men than Zahn to chunder up last week's breakfast; that's the reason Cohen had equipped the chamber with airsickness bags. McMurtrie was looking squeamish; but the two holy men just stood there, jaws grimly set, silently moving their lips. I daresay they were praying.

When the dials indicating time stopped spinning, Cohen carefully turned a little handwheel, looking at a radar screen, to adjust our altitude. The altitude of the ground varies from epoch to epoch, and it wouldn't do to materialze either above or below ground level. In the first case the chamber would drop like a stone; in the second, you'd have an explosion of the nuclear kind, which would leave nothing of the chamber or the people in it.

At last he set us down with hardly a bump and opened the door. From force of habit I jumped out with my gun ready, although I was sure that in this period there wouldn't be anything on land more formidable than an insect or a crab.

Indeed, nothing of an animal nature was in sight. The sun was just rising over a huge range of mountains east of us, curving around to westward on the north; while in the western sky a full moon, looking half again the size of ours of today, prepared to set.

Astronomers tell me that it was closer to the Earth than it now is, and

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hence the tides were higher. That's why the days were shorter than now. The tides act as a brake, which has slightly slowed the Earth's rotation in the last half a thousand million years. If you go back then, you need a watch or clock that can be set to run several percent faster than normal to keep time under control.

While the others climbed out of the chamber, I looked around. As I said, there was a big range of mountains to the east and north of us. We had materialized at the base of the foothills. These mountains were absolutely bare of vegetation, like some I once saw at the western end of Texas. Likewise our landing place was bare of plant life—at least, plant life large enough to be seen with the naked eye—which gave us a fine view in all directions. Since there wouldn't be any proper firewood in this period, we had brought along a little paraffin camp stove, so my clients wouldn't have to live on cold army rations.

These mountains, I thought, must be the Appalachians, before erosion wore them down to stumps. It turned out later that I was wrong. The forces of erosion had worn these mountains down to a flat plain long before the Appalachians had formed; then another movement of the Earth's surface had raised this part of the country. Erosion had carved out a new range, originally quite as impressive as these, and then had worn it down to low, rounded hills, the present-day Appalachians.

To the west, the prospect was quite different. A few kilometers away, down a gentle slope, stood a band of dark green, and beyond that a large lake or sea, just visible over the treetops.

Hubert asked sharply: "Mr. Rivers, are you sure you haven't taken us forward in time, to a day when mankind has vanished from the Earth?"

"Quite sure," I said. "Professor Prochaska has tried to explain it to me, but I'm no four-dimensional thinker. Seems that, according to his equations, it's theoretically possible to send the chamber forward in time—that is, into the future—but not to get it back. If, for instance, he sent me forward in the machine, and I saw certain things happening, then when I got back I might do something to stop them from happening, or at least to happen differently. That would cause another paradox. Can't have that sort of thing in a logical universe."

"Unless you admit divine intervention," said Zahn, looking benevolent. "'God hath power to help'—second Chronicles, twenty-five."

"You can admit it if you like," I said. "Me, I'm a hunting guide, not a theologian, and I won't try to argue such questions. Anyway, the professor doesn't want to lose his multi-million-dollar transition chamber by sending it to the future and then not being able to recover it."

I pulled out my pocket diastemeter and looked at the distant line of greenery. I said: "The vegetation along the shoreline is about three kilometers from here. If you want to see some Devonian life close up,

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how about walking down to the shore and back? By that time the crew will have the camp set up, and Ming will have tiffin ready."

The godlies agreed. McMurtrie said: "Reggie, should I bring my gun?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"I see you've got yours."

"Force of habit," I said. "After leading so many safaries and coming upon some bloody formidable creatures, I just don't feel comfortable without it. But I'd suggest you leave yours, so the weight won't tire you out."

The Reverend Zahn proved our least able hiker. Overweight and out of fitness, he kept panting and groaning and complaining about his new field boots. But he stuck with us until we reached the strip of vegetation along the shore of that unknown sea, which stretched to the horizon. The water and sand looked just like water and sand of our own time, the sea being very smooth and calm, with little ripples slapping the sand. But the plant life was something else.

Have you ever dreamed that you were shrunk to the size of an ant, pushing your way among grass stems on someone's lawn? Well, pushing one's way through a Devonian forest gives that illusion, too. The plants are the ancient relatives of a lot of primitive little things such as you find along stream banks: ferns, horsetails, and lycopods or ground pines. But the lycopods, instead of being little mossy finger-sized plants, were scaly-barked trees ten or fifteen meters tall, without anything you would recognize as leaves.

The horsetails, instead of being the right size for a potted plant, were three or four meters high. And the ferns, like the lycopods, were real trees with trunks like those of palms. The greenery at the top, instead of the fronds of palms, was a mass of fiddlehead ferns. I had the funny feeling that if a man had appeared in this landscape, he'd be the height of a seven-story building.

At first we saw no sign of animal life. As we strolled through the greenbelt toward the water, looking this way and that, Hubert and McMurtrie had their cameras buzzing. McMurtrie cried:

"Hey, there's a bug!"

He ran a couple of steps and stooped to grab the creature, whatever it was; but it got away from him. He said:

"It looked like a silverfish from our own time. Weren't they the first true insects to come ashore?"

"So scientists tell me," I said.

Hubert said: "I do believe that's a spider!" He adjusted one of his cameras for a close-up shot.

"Better not try to pick it up," said McMurtrie. "I don't know if they'd evolved poison glands so early, but we'd better not take chances."

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We sauntered on; McMurtrie exclaimed over a tiny millipede he saw on a tree trunk. He said to Zahn:

"Well, Reverend, you must admit this little forest is like nothing from our own time."

"I admit nothing," said Zahn. "For all I know, Mr. Rivers may have set us down on some forsaken coast of his native Australia. They have all sorts of strange plants and animals there."

"But you must admit we haven't seen any animals except a few—what's the name for all the jointed-legged creatures like insects and spiders, Reggie?"

"Arthropods, I believe," I said.

"Okay, arthropods. But no mammals, birds, or reptiles. That fits what the evolutionists tell us about the earliest land life."

"Does not prove a thing," said Zahn. "There are many parts of the present Earth where the wild life has been killed off or driven away. The fact that we don't see any antelopes or kangaroos does not prove that we might not see plenty if we crossed yonder mountain range." He pointed.

"Hey!" exclaimed Hubert. "There's a real land animal—a reptile, I think!"

We were at the upper edge of the beach, looking toward the water, where little ripples tinkled. On such a coast in Present, you'd expect to find swarms of sea birds, nesting ashore and foraging out in the water. But there was nothing whatever of that sort here.

Hubert indicated a creature lying in the sand a couple of meters from the water's edge. It was a lizardlike shape, clad in a soft, purple-brown skin; I suppose scientists would class it not as a reptile but as an amphibian, a kind of newt or salamander. It must have been about thirty centimeters long and stout for a newt.

Hubert hurried to where the creature lay, bringing up one of his cameras. At his approach, the newt hoisted itself off the sand on its four short legs but did not seem at all inclined to retreat before its human visitor.

It stood there, unmoving, while Hubert shot pictures. Then Hubert thrust out a finger as if to prod the newt into activity. Just as the finger touched the shiny, moist-looking hide, the newt whipped around and clamped its jaws on that finger.

"Ow!" cried Paul Hubert, jumping back and raising his arm. The newt kept its grip and was hoisted off the sand, dangling from Hubert's finger.

"Reggie!" cried Hubert. "How do I get this darned thing to let go? This hurts!"

"Try dunking it in the water," I said.

He stepped to the edge of the sea and lowered the newt into the water.

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Presently it let go his finger. Hubert tried to kick it but missed, and it swam away with an eelish wriggle.

"That'll teach you not to bother the local wildlife," I said, "unless you intend to shoot something for a trophy."

"Blast it!" he said. "Got my shoes soaking wet. Can I take them and my socks off to dry before we start back?"

"Whatever you like," I said.

When Hubert got his shoes and socks laid out on the strand, he decided to go wading. So he rolled up his pants legs above the knee and walked into the sea. McMurtrie decided to do likewise; since he was wearing shorts, the process was simpler for him. Presently the pair were splashing around and having a high old time.

"Like children," said the sonorous voice of Gilmore Zahn. "If you do not mind, I think I will take off my shoes and socks, also; but not for wading. I need to rest my feet."

"Takes a bit of practice to harden one," I said.

"You are right. Gluttony and sloth are my deadly sins, against which I ever struggle. I should take more regular exercise."

Then an outcry from the waders brought me round. They splashed back to shore with alacrity, and McMurtrie said:

"We just saw the damnedest thing out there! I guess you'd call it a Devonian lobster, only it didn't look like any lobster I ever saw."

Hubert chimed in: "About as long as I am, with a tapering jointed body. It had a lot of legs, with the first pair ending in pincers and the past pair flattened for oars."

"Probably harmless," I said. "Not that I should care to get into a tub with one. That's a eurypterid or sea scorpion."

"Scorpion, eh?" said Hubert. "Does it have a sting in its tail?"

"Don't know, but I doubt it," I said. "When you blokes have dried your feet and got yourselves shod again, it'll be time to start back."

There wasn't much more to the Devonian stop. There was really little for non-scientists like my sahibs to see, and we had bloody well exhausted the possibilities that morning. So it was no surprise when, that afternoon, they asked me to have Cohen bring them forward to the next stop without spending a night in the Devonian.

I passed the word to Cohen. Beauregard and his helpers looked a little disgruntled at having to pack up the tents and stuff without using them; but Beauregard was too practiced and self-disciplined to fuss. I thought I heard Pancho mutter something like "¡*Tal tonteria*!" I pretended not to hear, not wishing to make an issue of it. By tea time we were on our way through time again.

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Our next stop was in the Pennsylvanian, which European geologists call the late Carboniferous. This turned out to be even less fruitful than the Devonian stop. The topography had changed around the site; we seemed to be in a flat, swampy plain. Whether anything was left of the range of mountains east and north of the Devonian site, we couldn't tell, because we arrived in a pelting downpour. It rained and rained from a blanket of low gray clouds, blotting out sight of any mountains that might have existed.

We did see a couple of big amphibians—or perhaps reptiles, or halfway between—like overweight newts over a meter long, waddling among the trees. These trees were much like those we had seen in the Devonian, only bigger and more of them, from what little we could see through the deluge. During the lulls in the storm, we heard some grunts and croaks, like the noises frogs make in springtime for mating calls, only these were *basso profundo*.

Since we had gained a day on our schedule, we thought to wait out the rain. But when on the third day it was pouring as hard as ever, my clients indicated they would be just as glad to go on to the next time stop.

"Very interesting," said Zahn. "I did not know there were any such rain-forest swamps left, since the Brazilians and others have destroyed theirs to grow crops. But I understand they have set aside some areas as national parks; perhaps this is one."

"You mean," said McMurtrie, "you just won't believe we're back two hundred million-odd years B.C.?"

"Not unless you can prove it by the word of God," said Zahn, smiling.

The crew packed up the tents and the galley again, sloshing about in the downpour, and off we went to the later Jurassic.

This time, when we got out of the chamber, I cautioned my clients to stay close by me. "There are some bloody dangerous theropods," I told them. I looked especially hard at the Reverend Hubert, because I had sized him up as an impulsive, combative sort of bloke, just the kind likely to put himself and his fellow trippers in harm's way in dinosaur country.

"But not the famous *Tyrannosaurus*?" he said.

"No; that comes forty or fifty million years later."

"According to your false theory," said Hubert sharply, as if he wanted to make a Donnybrook out of it.

"Be calm, Paul," said Zahn. "Reggie said he wouldn't try to convert us to evolution; merely present evidence and let us make up our own minds. So let us watch, and observe, and save our inferences till we get home."

"I've made up my mind," said Hubert. "Anyway, I shouldn't think there'd be anything much to worry about without the tyrant lizard."

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"Not quite true, I'm afraid," I said. "There's a whole assortment of theropods of different sizes. That's how it works in nature; each size has its special prey, so that different species of predator don't much compete. The biggest at this time is *Allosaurus*, or at least a tyrannosaur-sized theropod, which some think is just an allosaur that has lived a long time. You know, most reptiles lack our internal cut-off mechanism, which stops growth at a certain stage. So the longer they live, the bigger they get.

"Some of my paleontological friends think these biggies should be put in a separate genus, which they call *Epanterias*. In any case, they are not the sort of blokes you want to take chances with."

Hubert stared about him in the forest. "Don't see any of them here, now," he said.

"Lucky for us," I said. "Here, don't wander into the chamber area! It's got to be kept clear so the chamber wallah can set it down in the same place with the crew."

We were in well-wooded country. As far as I could see from the site—not very far—it was more rolling than the flat plain of the Pennsylvanian. The trees around us were mostly palms of one sort or another; and also cycads, looking like thick, stumpy palms with flowerlike growths on their trunks. There were also a few araucarias or monkey-puzzle trees. At this period ancient relatives of the modern ginkgo also occurred, but I didn't see any of these at our site.

Among the trees were shrubs, some of them calamites or horsetails like those that, back in the Devonian, were among the first plants to invade the land. These were smaller and less impressive than the Devonian ones. There was no grass whatever, since it hadn't yet evolved.

Altogether, the flora began to look a little more like plants from our own era and less like things from another planet. Everything was pretty much the same somber green, which gets monotonous if you have to look at it for a long enough time.

There was also a buzz of insects, lack of which I had noted on the Devonian stop. As to other life forms, we should have to wait and see.

"Don't anybody wander off," I said. "In woods like these, it's the easiest thing in the world to get lost the minute you're out of sight of your base. You memorize a particular tree to help you find your way back; then, when you look for it, it has turned into a dozen trees, all looking exactly alike and all beckoning in different directions."

The crew arrived and set up the camp. While they were doing this, McMurtrie called: "Hey, there's a critter!"

The beast that had wandered out of the trees and was looking at us in a blank sort of way was a camptosaur, one of the smaller iguanodonts. A typical adult must weigh around a hundred or a hundred and fifty

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kilos. When it stands up on its hind legs, using its tail for a prop, it looks you in the eye. When it drops down to walk or run, it's about waist high, with the head sticking out horizontally in front and the tail projecting aft to balance. Otherwise it's a bloody unimpressive dinosaur: no noteworthy horns, fangs, or killing claws.

This bloke looked us over calmly and began to bite the tips off the nearest shrubs and saplings. Presently it wandered on, and after it came more of the same. The camptosaur is a herd animal, and the first one had been merely the point man—excuse me, point reptile—of a herd of twenty-odd. This included several young, who kept to the middle of the herd. They ambled past, munching browse and casting brief, incurious glances our way. I said:

"If you want dinosaur steak for dinner, there it is on the hoof."

McMurtrie said: "May I shoot, Reggie?"

"Okay," I said. He got out his gun, sighted on the nearest camptosaur, and fired. Down went the little dinosaur, rolling and thrashing. The others of the herd, startled, looked around, first at their conspecifics and then at us. Then they all set off at a trot and were soon out of sight.

I was starting toward the carcass to butcher it, when Zahn called: "Hey, Reggie! Look what is coming!"

Here came a stegosaur—in fact, a herd of twelve or fifteen of them. These dinosaurs plodded on all fours, with their back plates upright. They tell me these plates are not armor but heat-control radiators, like an elephant's ears. They browsed much as the camptosaurs did but closer to the ground, because their heads were carried lower in their natural stance.

The stegosaurs seemed even less interested in us than the camptosaurs had been. They were perhaps fifty meters distant through the trees, when Hubert said:

"Reggie, I've got to get closer for some pictures!"

"Me, too," said McMurtrie, almost as hot a camera fanatic as Hubert.

"Okay, provided Spence brings his gun," I said. "How about you, Reverend?" I asked Zahn. The preacher had so imposing a presence that it never occurred to me to address him as "Gilmore" or "Gil."

"I shall be happy where I am," said Zahn, lolling in one of our camp chairs. "After this parade of beasts of the field, the only thing I should really like to see would be a behemoth."

"Eh? Isn't that some mythical Biblical animal?"

"There is no such thing as a 'mythical' Biblical animal, Reggie," he said severely. "Some say the Hebrew word *re'em*, translated as 'behemoth,' is nothing but a hippopotamus, which they suppose to have dwelt in the rivers of Palestine in ancient times. But since the word from context

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means something enormous, I am sure it refers to one of your biggest dinosaurs—the ones with the long necks and small heads."

"You mean sauropods?"

"Yes, I believe that is indeed the name. Since a sauropod, from what I hear, outweighs a dozen hippopotami, this merely shows that the word of God is nought but the literal truth; and the sauropods did not become extinct millions of years ago but still lived in Biblical times."

"Hey, Reggie!" said Hubert. "Come on, or they'll all be out of sight!"

"Okay," I said. "We shall finish the argument later, Reverend. Better let Spence and me go ahead this time." Ordinarily I put the clients in front and follow them so that, first, they shall get the first shot; and second, so that if one of them stumbles he won't blow the guide's head off. Since Hubert had no gun, there was no point in this procedure on this occasion.

We had covered about half the distance to the herd of stegosaurs when a couple of them noticed us. They peered in a dimwitted way and resumed browsing; perhaps they took us for a herd of camptosaurs.

I waved Hubert forward. McMurtrie was already clicking away; he had his gun slung over his back to free his hands. Soon Hubert's video camera was whirring away.

Then the nearest stegosaur snorted. At once the rest of the herd looked around and gave similar snorts. They then all faced toward the center of the herd and plodded forward until they formed a tight circle, heads inward, with the two youngest members of the herd penned inside the circle of heads, like muskoxen in reverse.

"What's up?" asked Hubert, turning off his machine and looking back at me.

I was peering about pretty lively, too; for I had a suspicion of the meaning of this maneuver. I sniffed the air, trying to detect the rank reptilian odor of carnosaur.

"We'd better start back, sports," I said. "Something tells me this soon won't be a healthy place. Spence, sling your camera and bring your rifle round to where you can use it!"

McMurtrie and I began backing toward the camp, gripping our guns and looking about. Hubert was so involved in his picture taking that he stayed where he was.

"Come on back, Paul!" I shouted.

But Hubert continued photographing, shifting from one of his three cameras to another. Beside me, McMurtrie muttered: "Oh, my God!"

I looked in the direction he did, and here came the biggest *Epanterias* I've ever seen; must have been over fifteen meters long. It's built much like the tyrannosaur, except that it has much bigger forelimbs, with grasping claws.

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This theropod's attention was currently on the circle of stegosaurs, and it strode toward them with the direct approach of a hungry man to dinner.

As it came closer and seemed about to take a bite, the stegosaurs all began to lash their tails right and left. Each tail is armed with four big spikes, like horns. When the carnosaur leaned over to bite, one of these tails struck him in the belly with an impact like that of a bass drum. The sound almost made me say "Ouch!" in sympathy.

The theropod backed up with a grunt. After a few seconds of appraising the situation, it started round the circle. From my experience with animals, I suspected that it was really after, not one of the full-grown stegosaurs, but one of the smaller young ones in the center. I let out a full bellow:

"Paul Hubert! God damn it, come on back!"

He gave us a vague wave and kept on filming. The theropod marched clear around the circle of stegosaurs, now and then making a tentative snap at their hindquarters; but the lashing tails kept him away. At last he came around to the side of the circle where Hubert stood, buzzing and clicking away. It turned toward him as if to say: Well, what have we here?

"Get your gun ready!" I told McMurtrie, and then loudly to Hubert: "Come on, you silly galah!"

Hubert seemed at last to have got the idea. He slung his cameras and started to run toward us. The theropod came after him with long strides.

"Better shoot," I said. "Don't hit the Reverend by mistake. Aim for the heart."

We hoisted up our .600s and let fly, one barrel, then the other. At that range I'm sure all four shots hit. The impact knocked the theropod back on its haunches—or rather, back on its tail, which it uses as a prop when standing. Hubert ran past us, the cameras slung round his neck swinging this way and that and banging one another.

"Reload!" I said, hauling two more rounds out of my vest as I broke the gun.

McMurtrie was reloading when something took our attention and the theropod's, too. It neared the place where lay the camptosaur that McMurtrie had shot earlier. Unexpectedly, the camptosaur rolled to its feet, took one look at the theropod towering over it, and ran off. The theropod swiveled its head, following the fleeing camptosaur, and then started after it. In seconds, both were out of sight, though we could hear the crashing of their passage.

"Damn!" said McMurtrie. "I should have done as you advised."

"Why, what did you do?" I asked.

"Tried for a brain shot instead of a heart shot."

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"And doubtless the bullet glanced off the skull and stunned the animal. With dinosaur, the brain is so small in proportion to the skull that you have only an outside chance of hitting it."

"I've always heard they were pretty stupid," said McMurtrie.

"No stupider than modern reptiles. They're all equipped with instincts that take care of all the contingencies they're likely to meet, like that circle the stegosaur formed. And these blokes lasted a couple of hundred million years, compared to a mere couple of million for our own kind. So don't snoot the dinosaur!"

The stegosaur maintained their circle for at least an hour after the theropod had disappeared; then they broke up and went back to browsing. Whether the *Epanterias* caught the camptosaur, or whether it lay down and died of its bullet wounds, I shall never know. It's against my principles to let a wounded animal get away, probably to die somewhere and be of no use to anyone but the local scavengers. Not sporting. But in this case, I think I could be excused for not following up the matter. I had enough problems from having to wet-nurse a pair of preachers who, though they tried to be nice about it, were sure I was a limb of Satan.

When we returned to the camp, Zahn grabbed his assistant in a smothering embrace, with tears running down his fat face. "Oh, Paul!" he cried. "I thought you were done for! I should never have let you come on this expedition, knowing your imprudence! What would I ever tell your sister?"

The upshot was that, since the day was nearly gone, we should camp there through the night and set out for the next stop, the early Eocene, on the morrow.

"I have seen all I need to here," said Zahn. "If I missed the behemoth, I have seen the dragon—the veritable dragon alluded to in Job, Isaiah, and sundry other places. Like the behemoth, it evidently survived down to historic times. It is but one more proof of the Bible's literal veracity."

Of course any geologist would call that nonsense, citing the age of the last deposits in which dinosaurs are found, sixty-odd million years before Present. But such arguments would roll off the Reverend Zahn's mind like gravel off a turtle's shell.

During the night, McMurtrie was on watch and I was trying to get my four-hour turn of sleep, when the sound of raised voices from the next tent woke me up. It sounded as if the preachers were having a dispute. I heard Zahn, in that splendid orotund baritone, say:

"But Paul, do you not see? Once you start admitting that certain verses in the Bible may be interpreted as figures of speech, you open the door to all the Biblical historians and analysts, who want to reduce God's word to a lot of legends and folk tales. You end up with a document with

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no more authority than the *Mahābhārata*. It is the camel's head in the tent, the thin edge of the wedge."

"But Gil!" protested Hubert. "On some points the scholars have us by the short hairs; for instance, where the Bible contradicts itself, as in the two diverse Creation narratives and the two Flood narratives."

"It only seems like a contradiction to our limited mortal minds," said Zahn. "To divine wisdom, the solution is plain; and we should not set ourselves up as wiser than God."

"But Gil," persisted Hubert, "don't we have to allow some figures of speech, as for example where it speaks of the 'four corners of the earth' in Job and again in Revelations? We all know the Earth doesn't have corners."

"In such cases," said Zahn, "we apply Galileo's explanation, that the Bible was written in language that the people of the time of writing could understand, under divine guidance. But you miss the main point."

"What's that?"

"Once you admit Biblical fallibility, you undermine its authority as the moral code that God commanded men to live by, and you know as well as I that the morals of our country have—if you will excuse the expression—gone to Hell in the last century. You know the figures on divorce, juvenile criminality, and all the rest. If you start by saying: Oh, well, the 'seven days' of Genesis are just a figure of speech for the 'thousand years' of the ninetieth Psalm, the next step is to discard the prohibitions on adultery and fornication as just figures of speech; and you end up discarding the laws against theft and murder. We—ministers of God like us—are civilization's last defense against barbaric anarchy."

"But all those prohibitions can just as well be argued on a rational basis—"

"What rational basis?"

"Why, the long-term effect of unchecked offenses, from fornication to murder, when everybody starts indulging in those vices. You end up with gangster rule."

"That's how the Secular Humanists talk. A secular philosophy may look fine on paper, but it's like a shiny new boat that will not float. Take what happened to Marxism, which had moral codes much like those of Christianity! It, too, looked fine and logical on paper; so it was tried out in Russia. After seventy years it was obviously not giving people the better lives it had promised. So the people, who had been forced by ferocious penalities to submit to it, rose up and threw it away. I fear, Paul, that you are headed down that same primrose path."

"I am not! If something's plainly untrue, you can't expect me to defend it to the laity—"

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"Hush, man! You will awaken the whole camp!" The argument continued, but in an unintelligible grumble.

It seemed to me that Zahn implied, without saying so out loud, that a little pious fakery was okay if it helped to lead the masses along the moral paths they ought to follow for their own good. I'm not qualified to judge such a view as either good or bad.

At breakfast next day, I noticed that feelings between our two preachers were not of the best. They never spoke to each other, save for such needfuls as "Please pass the salt." It looked as if their disagreement over Biblical interpretation had blown up into a major quarrel. Otherwise they ate in grim silence, and this continued while the crew packed up the equipment for the next jump in time.

The next stop was in the lower Eocene, about the time of the Wasatch formations. This would show the profound difference between this fauna and the one that, fifteen or twenty million years earlier, had roamed the land. Before the K-T Boundary Event, the country swarmed with dinosaurs: big ones, little ones, and every size between. After the Event, there was nothing but the little mammals, the size of rats and mice, and the birds that survived the Event. The pterosaurs had also vanished; so had some of the marine reptiles, though I couldn't demonstrate that in the middle of a continent.

Cohen set us down on a little hill on a fine spring morning. I got out first, as usual, but there was nothing to be alarmed about. We were in a drier climate than on the last two stops, so the trees tended to cluster in valleys and along watercourses, leaving the hilltops clear. There were even little patches of real grass, though nothing like the grassy meadows and plains that appeared in the Miocene. Grass was a welcome sight after all the bare earth, even in well-watered places, of the Mesozoic and earlier. The bare Mesozoic earth is speckled with shrubs and herbs, often spiny; but these don't give the mental comfort of real grass. And wildflowers bloomed everywhere, red and violet and everything in the spectrum between.

Of animal life, none was in sight until, through my glasses, I picked up a herd of small beasts wandering over a hillside in the middle distance, nibbling at the greenery. I called my clients' attention to it, saying:

"That's the sort of thing you can expect to see in this period."

"How big are those animals?" asked McMurtrie.

"Hard to tell from here, but I should guess about the size of a setter dog. The condylarth *Phenacodus*, I think. You won't find many larger kinds."

Looking through his own binoculars, Paul Hubert said: "That's funny.

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They're eating leaves and buds, but they seem to have paws like a dog's instead of hooves."

"That's common in this period. The herbivores had only just begun to evolve their claws into hooves."

"Are you sure there are no dinosaurs?" said Hubert.

I shrugged. "I've been here before, and to the still earlier Paleocene, and I've never seen a sign of one. I won't say that a remnant of the dinosaurs—probably one of the little blokes—might not have survived the Event somewhere; but no fossils have yet been found of such survivors."

"That doesn't prove they don't exist in some other part of the world," said Zahn.

"Quite true, old sport," I said. "But what's been found is all we've got to go on."

"You have the word of God," he said. "But there, I oughtn't to preach to you."

"How about predators?" asked McMurtrie. "Seems to me that, wherever you have a lot of plant eaters, you ought to find some critters that have evolved to eat the plant eaters."

"Right!" I said. "But the carnivores here are pretty primitive, too. They belong to an order called Creodonta, which died out without descendants. The biggest locally is a fellow named *Oxyaena*, about the size and shape of our modern sea otter, though it lives on dry land. There are also doglike and foxlike forms.

"And yes, I almost forgot. There's a big flightless bird of prey. Early in the Age of Mammals, such birds evolved to prey on the mammals, which were mostly small, nondescript creatures. They flourished most in South America, which was cut off from the rest of the world. When the more modern carnivores evolved among the mammals, these birds couldn't take the competition and disappeared.

"The one we have to watch out for here is *Diatryma*, which looks like the Aussie emu; except that instead of a long, thin neck with a small head, it has a stout neck and a head like an eagle's only bigger."

"Shouldn't think a bird would be anything to worry about," said McMurtrie.

"Famous last words," I said. "The first law of survival is: Don't take chances with anything big enough to kill you. This bird is, in fact, except for crocodiles and the hippolike *Coryphodon*, about the biggest creature this period has to show."

After breakfast, I laid out a course for a two-hour morning's hike. I found this nature walk bloody frustrating, because it proved hard to keep my lambs moving. Zahn complained about his sore feet. McMurtrie and

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Hubert wanted to stop and photograph everything, plant or animal. The fauna, as I warned them, proved such a monotonous lot of small-to-medium-sized, nondescript creatures that they complained about that.

When McMurtrie, pointing to a group of terrier-sized animals, asked: "How would you classify them?"

I replied: "I wouldn't. If we had a real paleontologist here, he could tell us which are the ancestors of the horse, and which of the rhino, and so on. Some are archaic mammals that died out without descendants."

The biggest beasts we flushed were a pair of coryphodonts, like enlarged pygmy hippopotami, about the size of the modern black rhino. They were munching plants along the bank of a small stream. When we came up, the male evidently thought we threatened his female, for he faced us, flashed his four big tusks, and gave a loud grunt. McMurtrie and I got our guns ready; but when we advanced no closer, the coryphodonts went back to eating.

We were headed back to camp, when Hubert cried: "Hey, look at that!" In an instant he was kneeling and sighting with his camera.

The rest of us lined up behind him to see. What he was photographing was a snake—a two-meter one—swallowing a small mammal. The snake had engulfed the head and was, millimiter by millimeter, working its jaws forward over the body.

"Kill it!" cried Zahn.

"No, you don't!" said Hubert. "I want this on film."

"The snake is the symbol of evil! The Lord God cursed the serpent above all cattle, and ordained that man should bruise its head! See Genesis eight."

"Medieval superstition," growled McMurtrie, struggling to untangle his camera from the sling holding his rifle across his back.

"So says an ignorant unbeliever!" cried Zahn. "Know you not—"

"Please!" I said. "We shall be late for tiffin. Come along, all of you, and let the arguments rest. Come on, Paul."

"I want to get the whole sequence," said Hubert, focusing on the snake, which proceeded with engulfing its prey as if we were not even there. "Go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Better come, Paul," I said. "This place may not be so harmless as it looks."

"Oh, leave me alone!" he snapped.

I struggled with my own temper, got it under control, and said: "I'm going back to camp, and I advise all you blokes to come along. Otherwise I shan't be responsible." I was bloody irritated with my clients.

I started off. McMurtrie, after one more camera shot, came after me; and then came Zahn. That left Hubert, still kneeling and filming. I faced determinedly away and marched up the slope leading to the camp.

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We had got perhaps thirty meters from Hubert when McMurtrie looked back and cried: "Hey, Reggie! Turn around, quick!"

I turned. Zahn was a few meters behind McMurtrie and me. A big diatryma had come out of the nearest copse and advanced on Hubert, jerking its head back and forth with each stride. Hubert was so absorbed in his photography that he seemed oblivious to the bird's approach.

"Hey, Paul!" I yelled as loudly as I could, at the same time bringing up my own gun. McMurtrie was also trying to get his rifle into the shooting position, but he had got the gun sling tangled with one of his camera straps.

Hubert looked up just as the diatryma stooped, shot out that raptorial head, and snapped up both the snake and its prey. When it raised its head, the snake dangled, writhing, from its beak.

Hubert's obvious cue was to jump up and run like hell. But, as I said, he was an impulsive, hot-tempered bloke. What the silly galah did was to yell: "Bastard!," grab his broad-brimmed canvas hat, and whack the diatryma in the face with it.

I couldn't shoot, because Hubert was directly between me and the diatryma. The bird dropped the snake, shot out that wicked beak, and gave Hubert a mighty peck. Hubert took one step back and fell into the grass.

The diatryma stooped and started looking around for its snake. I fired, and the bird toppled back into the grass.

We all rushed back, but too late to do anything for Paul Hubert. The bird's beak had laid open a gash in his neck as long as the span of your fingers and centimeters deep. Blood was still pouring out. Hubert made a bubbling moan and then lay still. A check of his pulse showed no heart action. I suppose an ambulance with a crew of paramedics could have done something to save him, but we didn't have that.

I took a quick look around for the snake, but there was no sign of it. I imagine that when the bird dropped it, it had beat a hasty retreat, perhaps thanking its reptilian gods for deliverance.

I needn't go into the dismal details of that hike back to camp, with two of us carrying Hubert's body, taking turns. There was no argument for continuing the safari further, although I had planned a stop in the Pliocene. We put the body in a body bag I had stored with our gear. I had packed it without telling anyone, just in case.

While the crew were stowing gear in the chamber, McMurtrie said: "Reggie, may I speak to you privately?"

"Okay," I said. "Let's go over this way, and keep your voice down."

He said: "I saw the whole thing, because I kept looking back when you didn't. The Reverend Zahn saw the bird come out of the woods and start

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toward Hubert. Instead of warning Hubert, who was so intent on his pictures that he wasn't aware of anything else, Zahn quietly, without a word, set off after us. I think he wanted the bird to get Hubert."

"Maybe you've got something," I said, and told McMurtrie about the dispute I had overheard between the preachers the night before, when McMurtrie had been out on watch. "He must have regarded Hubert as a deserter from the army of righteousness."

"It sounds like murder!" said McMurtrie. "Though I don't know if you can indict a man for simply walking away from a disaster in the making. He saw that bird coming and never uttered a peep."

"I doubt if we could make any charge stick," I said. "We never know what's really going on in another bloke's mind, and you'd have a hell of a time proving anything to a jury. Even if we had the good oil on him, he'd claim a murder committed back in the Eocene didn't come under any contemporary laws."

"He doesn't believe we were fifty million years back. Four or five thousand, maybe, to squeeze geological time into the six-thousand-year frame of Genesis."

"Four or five thousand would be quite far enough back to antedate the laws of the state of Missouri. No, we'd better leave bad enough alone. This will raise hell with the finances of Rivers and Aiyar; the other time we lost a client we almost went out of business."

That wasn't quite the end of the story. We got back to Present without incident. Zahn took over the disposal of Hubert's body and gear, for which I was grateful. When we parted, he gave me that big, bland smile, waved a farewell, and said:

"Very interesting, Reggie. Very interesting indeed! But I fear you have not converted me to your irreligious views." And off he went.

A few days later, this picket line of marchers from Zahn's church showed up with their signs, some of which not only accused me of being old man Antichrist himself but also implied that I had caused Hubert's death. The story Zahn had told from his pulpit was that I had deliberately exposed Hubert to danger by walking away from him when he wouldn't stop his photographing and come along. As for Gilmore Zahn's part, he said he knew nothing of the diatryma's approach until McMurtrie and I looked around and began shooting. McMurtrie remembered otherwise, so it would have been his word against Zahn's.

In another sermon he made a different claim, that the whole experience was a satanic illusion. They had not gone back in time at all, but I and my assistant devils had cast an illusion on him and Hubert, like the nonsense people think they experience on certain drugs. I couldn't very well disprove this statement, except that it didn't explain why poor young

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Hubert arrived back in Present dead. But such people don't worry about consistency.

After a few days of picketing, I went to Zahn's sumptuous big church, an ornate structure with lots of gold leaf. I sent word that I wished to speak with Zahn and was led in at once. When we were seated, I told Zahn to call his pickets off, saying:

"McMurtrie and I have sat on the true story of Hubert's death, although Spence has published everything else about the trip in his paper. If you don't call off your dogs, I'll see to it that his unvarnished account is published."

"He could never prove a thing," said Zahn with that damned smile. "Questions of who first saw the bird would be his word against mine, and mine carries a lot of weight."

"I don't doubt that," I said. "But it wouldn't do you and your church any good, now would it?"

"I would sue them for libel!"

"And the paper would counter-sue, and the case would end up enriching the lawyers and impoverishing everyone else."

"I will not be dictated to by a scoffing infidel!"

"I haven't scoffed at you or your beliefs or your church. I daresay it does much good, even if I don't agree with your theology. But I have now told you what I shall do if your people don't leave my partner and me alone. Good-day, sir!"

That was that. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but the next day there were fewer pickets, and the next still fewer. On the third day there was only one sign carrier, and he was the last. I still occasionally saw in the papers where Zahn and his new assistant pastor denounced me as a threat to Christian civilization.

This went on for a year, but then a big scandal blew up. Seems Gilmore Zahn had been siphoning off the church's revenue and spending the money in ways not authorized by his governing board. Officially, it was on certain charitable enterprises he was personally interested in. He did undoubtedly spend some of it thus; whether he also spent some on a dollybird or put it in his own bank account, it was impossible to tell for lack of records. It was plainly illegal, but ostensibly done for such good purposes that they let him off with a slap on the wrist. But a hostile faction in the church used the incident as a pretext for getting him booted out. I don't know where he is now.

Anyway, Mr. Proctor, you can see why I'm averse to leading time safaris to settle theological arguments. Time travel is mysterious enough without dragging in God! ●

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I'm cold. I wish it'd stop raining. Granny Teeth never comes when it rains, and I like her, even if Sammy don't.

"What you want any ol' gook ghost-lady to come hanging 'round bothering us?" he asks. Then he smiles at me. I think maybe he likes her, too. Some. Even if the only reason why he likes her's 'cause she keeps me quiet. That's important, keeping quiet, for a kid.

When we're warm, when we're places out of the rain, that's when she comes. Other people don't see her, and Sammy . . . I dunno if he sees her or if he just says he does, for me. Times Sammy gets enough money together to buy the two of us a couple of hamburgers at McDonald's, that's funny, then. We go in, see, and Granny Teeth, she comes in after. Sammy says what we want and puts down the money, all crinkly and dirty like it gets. Times we go in, ain't hardly nobody there 'cept us and the people behind the counter. They act like they're half asleep most times, seeing nothing, almost. Sometimes Sammy's gotta shout and shout to get our order heard, and even then . . .

While the girl's got her back to us—getting our burgers, I guess—Sammy talks to me. He don't say boo to Granny Teeth, though. Could be he don't see her; could be it's a game. I dunno. Sammy, he plays games with me. Anyway, this game he turns away from the counter and Granny Teeth shuffles around him real careful, then she just floats up over the counter and down behind it. Ghosts can do that. Ain't noplace ghosts can't go. Sammy, he don't look, but I see what she does. She grabs us a bag, stuffs it full of burgers, fries, two chocolate shakes, what we wanted, shoves it over the counter at us and takes our money real fast. "Have a nice day!" she says, and her teeth flash gray and gold.

One time I looked back. She swapped our money for her own. I know, even if I never seen her do it. I saw the girl back of the counter pick up what should've been Sammy's money, only all it was was a bunch of brown, dry, dead leaves. Granny Teeth was just standing there, watching the girl, looking all upset. Maybe 'cause the girl's gawping at them leaves, I dunno. Sammy says gooks got fifteen thousand different ways you can insult 'em, and something mean to do back at you for every one of them insults. I hope the girl didn't get in no trouble with Granny Teeth, insulting her dead leaf money. I guess when you're a ghost, money don't matter. I wish Uncle John knew that.

I wish Sammy'd buy me a Happy Meal sometime. I never had one of them. But I don't like asking Sammy for more than he gives me straight out, on account of he'd give me what I asked for and go without himself. So I don't ask. Already he give me more than Uncle John ever did, and I never give him even my last name.

I give that to Granny Teeth, though. I give her my name; hers, too. Sammy tells me, "Corey, thing about these gooks is, see, that they got

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some names no way a kid like you could pronounce. What are you —six?—seven?"

I won't tell. You tell *one* thing, you start telling all of 'em. Anything you say maybe gets back to someone else. Maybe the police, and then I know what *that* means: They'd take me back.

I'm not going back. I'm going to Washington, D.C., with Sammy, and Granny Teeth, and after we get there and see what Sammy says he's got to see, then I'll try to get him to let me stay with him forever.

If he says no, I'll run away again. I can. I got to. If you can't go back, you got to run away.

It's safe to tell Granny Teeth, though, seeing as how she's a ghost. I talk to her; Sammy don't. You got to name what you talk to, else it's not real. She has these gold teeth, see? Two gold teeth right where a vampire's got fangs, only she ain't no vampire. I call her Granny Teeth, and she smiles.

It's raining now. Seems sometimes like it's been raining forever, the black over me, and the wet, and the cold. We found us a place to sleep 'long by an old road that used to be a pretty important highway. Used to be, people'd stop here. Lotta things used to be. Sammy, he's got us a fire burning in this old oil drum was a trash barrel, but there ain't nowheres near anything like a solid roof over our heads; just only trees. Picnic tables, too; most too bust up to lie under so it'd do any good, though.

Sammy looks up into the rain. He got brown hair color of the dirt back home and green eyes pale as a peeled twig. He smiles up to heaven and his teeth run shining with the falling water.

"This it, Lord?" He's laughing when he talks, so easy with his god. "*This* the thanks a man earns from you for trying to keep a promise?" He taps his wrist like he's got a watch there. He ain't got a wristwatch since I know him, since that night I come on him out of the trees and there he was, like he's waiting for me.

"You can't tell me You don't know what day it is, Lord," he says. "And that means You know what day's coming. When I heard that last blast, I got on the road right away, but ten days isn't all that much when you're going so far on foot. Now listen: I don't have all that much money; I never did. Anybody wants to tell you any lies about how us Jews got all the money in the world, you send them around to have a word with Sammy Nachman. I'll set 'em straight, You bet. If I had the bread, I'd be sitting in some nice, warm Amtrak train, drinking a cold beer. But it's all on foot, all the way, and the kid—" He looks at me and I don't know what to do with the good feeling it gives me "—the kid can't march as fast as me. So whaddaya say, Lord? You do Your part, I'll do mine. Ease up on the rain, okay? Save it for spring."

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I look up at the same spot in the sky I see Sammy do. Nothing but clouds, nothing but rain. I never knowed the Jews to pray like he does, out loud, talking so anyone can understand. I hope his god don't mind English. I thought it was against the rules or something for a praying Jew to talk like that to his god. We need Sammy's god to listen to him now. I'd ask mine, only Jesus don't listen to all the lies a dumbass little kid makes up to tell. Jesus hates liars; he burns 'em in Hell. Anybody knows that. I didn't need Uncle John to tell me something I knew. I don't take off Jesus no more; just only Sammy.

Granny Teeth got her a god? A ghost-god? I wonder. She comes back, I'll ask.

Sammy asked real good. The rain stopped that night, while we lay wrapped up in our old green blankets on the ground by the picnic tables. I brushed the hair out of my eyes, first up. It's pretty cold, and the little bit of grass I see's got frost. Sammy says he could always sleep through anything, even in 'Nam. Home, I got used to waking the minute I hear any noise. Nothing sneaks up on you that way. It's safer.

So I wake now; and the first thing I see is Granny Teeth's feet next to my face. She's sitting on one of them bust-up tables. Ghosts don't mind splinters or the cold. Her toes are curled up, brown and round like a row of acorns. She goes barefoot—what's a ghost got to worry over about where she steps, anyhow?—and her toenails are thick and yellow and gray.

" 'Morning, Granny Teeth," I say. I'm glad she's back.

"Good morning, Corey." I like how she bows her head to me—not much, only a little. It makes me feel grown up and worth something. "Does it go well with you and this man?" she asks.

"Could be better." I smile to let her know I'm joking. Ghosts, they're monster kin. It don't do to get 'em mad. I remember how Granny Teeth looked the time I told her just a bit about Uncle John and how it was. I thought her eyes'd take fire, burn me right up then and there.

"Better? How? You are hungry?" She's wearing an old brown robe, loose, but she's got a cracked blue plastic pockabook hanging off her neck. It snicks open and she roots through it. "You need money, you and Sammy?"

Money? From Granny Teeth? Ghost money. Dead leaves. She scrabbles in that old pockabook of hers, I can hear 'em rustling. I don't laugh, because of what I said about ghosts getting mad. I don't laugh, but I know how it makes me feel full of bubbles inside, holding in the laughter. It feels good, holding in laughter, knowing laughter's all that's in there to hold.

"We be okay, Granny Teeth," I tell her. I know how to talk respectful.

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I got taught that much, didn't I? Hard taught. "You keep your money." *Your dried-up old dead leaf ghost money.* "Thanks anyhow."

I smile, 'cause it just tickles so to think I'm please-and-thanking this ol' gook-lady ghost for offering us them leaves she totes 'round and swaps for the real dollars we plunk down every time Sammy and me buy food. I smile big—can't help but—and that feels good, too. More right-feeling things are coming into my life these days. I'm some surprised I recognize them after this long.

Granny Teeth clicks that cracked blue pockabook shut; her lips, too. She don't smile. Her whole face folds in at the mouth, all the wrinkles running like fishnets, like roads crisscrossing good brown country earth. "Sammy is a good man," she says, "but he does not know."

"Know what?" I ask. She shakes her head.

"You do not know either, Corey. You are too young to know."

" 'Bout what? The war? I know all 'bout that," I say, proud. "Soldiers an' bombs an' fire-fights an' the jungle—bugs big as cats, rats big as dogs, I know it. Sammy told me."

Granny Teeth sighs. "Sammy is a good man," she says again. "But he can never teach you what he refuses to see for himself. He can not tell you what he will not let *himself* know." And she sits so still it's like I could reach out and scoop a piece of stillness off her, hold it in my hand. Then, any time the hollering started up, and the hitting, I could just uncup my hands, let the silence and the stillness fly high, fly free, soar up to Heaven and drip down over me, wrap me safe in the blanket of the rain.

Sudden I 'magine that was I to come close, lean in, put up my arms to her long, skinny ones like I used to do with my daddy and lay my head against the hard bones bottoming her neck, could be I'd smell the earth smell. New-turned earth, wet with the deep-running water of melted snow. Spring earth, gulping down the seed, pushing up the flowers.

My daddy once give me a little red plastic shovel, let me plant yellow tufty flowers by the big tree out behind the house come spring. After he went and let that tractor roll over on him, stupid like he done, and Uncle John come, I didn't get no more time to do more'n smell the springtime earth. No red plastic shovel any more. No yellow tufty flowers.

What'm I doing? I was only dreaming 'bout doing that, putting my arms 'round Granny Teeth, and here I *go*, catch myself doing it for real. I yelp loud and push back from her, squirming out of her arms, shaking bad. Oh Jesus, touch a ghost like that, it's cold. *Cold!* Her robe's like fuzzy brown worms all over—I *felt* them, I *did*. Worms that crawl in your skull, eat out your eyeballs when you die. Oh Jesus, I didn't mean what I said before 'bout you. Jesus, You gotta help me now, don't got no one else but You, like my daddy always did used to say. You don't burn up

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liars when they're only little children, You couldn't do something half so heartless, no, and anyway, no matter what Uncle John says, don't believe him, they was *his* lies, all! Jesus Lord, I'm scared, and Sammy's sleeping, and maybe his god won't pay me no mind 'cause I'm no Jew. Oh Jesus, *cold!*

"Corey!" Granny Teeth stares at me. I see by her eyes how sharp I hurt her, shouting like that, shoving her away. Lord, it wasn't *my* fault, I swear. One minute I'm just thinking 'bout how nice it'd be, smelling home earth, next I'm in her arms. . . .

Magic. Yeah, that's what. Ghosts can do magic, can't they? Witch you any old way they can?

See, I said so. Not my fault at *all*. I don't lie. I don't care what *he* said, or the way that tired-eyed skinny lady with the clipboard looked at me that time she come 'round to ask all those questions. I don't ever lie.

I don't know I'm still shaking 'til Granny Teeth lays one hand on my arm and I feel my flesh twitch and shudder in her grasp. Her face is flat and calm, like the surface of a pond. Almost I dream I'm seeing her eyes through a depth of brown, weed-scummed water. She's got kind eyes. She's not even some mad at me. Not like the *waste-my-time* clipboard lady at all.

"Corey . . . " Hearing my name soft-spoke that way makes the shakes stop. She takes away her hand from my arm. "I did not mean to frighten you. I am only here to help you and Sammy. It is difficult. There are too many walls, but I must try. It is a debt. A vow I made. Do you understand vows, child?"

I nod. Not that I *do* understand or anything, not really. Vows are for when you get married. Who'd marry a ghost, birth a bunch of ghost babies? Debts are what bills mean—too many bills, not enough money; too many mouths, not enough work got in return to make feeding 'em worth a man's while. But only live folks got debts to pay and money to pay 'em. What's she mean to do? Count out stacks of dead leaves into Sammy's hand?

Granny Teeth got the gentlest smile I ever see, even if it does always look half sad. "You are a good boy, Corey." Her hand's cool, full of the spring-earth smell cupped in the palm. "You will help me pay out what I owe Sammy, and there will be enough left to repay all that is owed you, too."

Owed me? What's owed me? 'Cept the farm, and the earth, and I'm not going back for *that*. Uncle John wanted it so bad, let him keep it. Maybe my daddy'd should've left it to *him*, like he was always saying after he drunk too much. Sometimes when he didn't drink a drop. I don't want nobody owing me *nothing*. Just let me alone.

The longer Granny Teeth looks at me, the stiffer her smile gets until

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there's no softness left at all. Little ghosts get under my skin just looking at her. Stern, she says, "To bury such treasure! This is sin. It shall be repaid! Oh yes, this debt too." Then she's gone.

Well! Sure enough, now I *do* know what ol' Granny Teeth meant with all her talk of debts and help and the like. Treasure! Why, sure, I heard the tales, the old ghost stories telling how the dead lead the living to riches hid deep in the walls of abandoned houses, buried at the roots of old trees.

But when it's light and I wake up Sammy to tell him what Granny Teeth's promised us, he just laughs.

"Treasure, Corey? *Her?* Tell me some ol' gook ghost got any money hidden? Sure, maybe a coupla dozen coins buried back in 'Nam, but *here?* Sorry, Champ. No way you and me're gonna go back to 'Nam to dig up that kinda treasure."

He don't say no more about it and I don't say nothing too. I think maybe Granny Teeth's gonna come looking after us, all her talk of paying, but that's the last I see of her for nights and nights.

Sammy and me, we press on. Nights, it gets lonesome. Sammy and me, we make fire, steal fire, borrow fire anyplace we can. When we take another man's fire, Sammy pays with his stories 'bout 'Nam. If they'll hear 'em. Sometimes the men we meet got too many 'Nam stories of their own and don't even want what they got to start with. Then we move on.

Finally the night comes when the dark runs out and all the sky's a light we can't ignore. No more shadow-walking. ("Folks see a raggy man like me with a kid like you, they'll ask questions, and I got no time for answers. Let's try to get there on the quiet, Corey.") There ain't no more shadows. Lights everywhere, every street, every road, and the sky ahead's holding a white dusting of light that makes the shapes of buildings burn black and shiny against my eyes.

City light. Washington, D.C., city lights. Sammy says we're almost there.

We walk in over the hard roads. Nighttime and no rain. Sometimes, beside the highways, there's trees. Days, we sleep there. I like the feel of the bark against my back, the roots twisting down deep into the earth like they're looking for something they lost. I put my ear to the trunk and dream I can hear the old tree's heartwood singing.

Soon there's big buildings, harder roads, and more houses than trees. Sammy says we're in the city itself now. We pass houses where the light inside's all warm and gold. I put out my hands to catch the sweet spill of it, like it was magic that could warm me. Oh, it's cold out here! I stare at the windows, slabs of shining light thick enough to be tombstones, holding back the warm, keeping it away from me. I can't hardly recall how it used to feel, being on the right side of windows, and a roof above,

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and someone to give me a way to keep warm without a fire to sear my skin.

I look at my arm. The old marks' still there. Little round red blisters all up and down the inside of both my arms from the cigarettes. Some come fat, some come thin. Uncle John rolled his own. *Be a man, Corey! Christ knows, you eat enough for a man!*

I can still smell the soured beer hot on his breath. The sizzle of my own skin clogs my ears so much, sometimes I miss hearing anything else. So, when I try, why can't I remember more than the sweet spring earth smells, and the little red shovel, and the tufty yellow flowers by my eyes? Where's my mama's face? Where's my daddy's arms to keep me safe, the way he promised when she died? But all I got to wrap 'round me in the dark is Sammy's old green blanket, and that smells burnt some too.

Comes the night we don't got to steal fire no more. There's steam grates to lie on, and that feels nice. The other folk, the ones who tell us to shove over, we got their spot and they'll fight us for it maybe, Sammy knows what to say to 'em:

"Look, I got a kid here." And they kinda blink their eyes and tilt their heads like sorry old birds to stare at me. But they move over and they let us rest.

This is the night we'll go there. Where's there? I don't know. Only Sammy said it like it was the most important thing in the world, *there.* He puts all the weight of his heart behind a word, you know it's important, even if you don't know nothing else, nor need to be asking.

"Soon as it's dark, Corey," he says. "We're gonna go there. I'm gonna sleep some now, you stand guard, okay? Sentry duty. You can sleep tonight, while I do what I came here to do."

"I don't wanna sleep then," I tell him. "I wanna help you do it."

He smiles at me, and when he reaches out his hand to touch my cheek I don't flinch back. Funny. His hand's hard, got a bitter, sad smell to it, but under the shell there's a kindness makes it softer than anything in my memories. "You don't even know what I'm here to do," he says.

"I don't care," I tell him.

"Yeah, I guess you don't." His smile gets some brighter, and it's so sweet to feel a hand on me that don't got any pain behind it. "Okay, then. But I bet you're gonna be all confused. See, there's a vow I've got to keep—"

"A vow! You getting married, Sammy?" It's the first I hear of it, and my stomach goes to knots.

"Marri—? Nah, not *that* kind of vow, kid!" He laughs, and I can share it with him. "A vow's a *promise,* is all. Just let me do what I gotta, you

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keep quiet. If you get bored waiting, find something to do with yourself, no questions until after, then I'll explain, deal?"

"Deal." I nod. I'm good at keeping quiet. And a vow's a promise; now I know.

"Okay," he says again, curling up like a fat ol' caterpillar in his green blanket. "Wake me when it's sundown."

While he sleeps, I watch the people. They don't see us. We're camping on a steam grate up against one of the big buildings here. There's plenty of bushes for cover. Sammy told me all 'bout how that's important, cover. There's all kindsa ways a man can hide, he said, and sometimes knowing when to hide will save you. I knew that already; I just wasn't so good at it. I sit real still on guard over Sammy. I find this big branch and I pretend we're in 'Nam together, and I got a gun in my hands. Nobody better try to mess with me now. He tries, I'll shoot him dead.

I watch the feet of the people passing by, see 'em through the roots and low branches of the bushes. It's boring all right, but I stay true to my promise. My *vow*. Now I got me a vow to keep too, like Granny Teeth, like Sammy. I start off pretending that I'm all there is to stand between him and them who'd stop him from keeping his vow, and I end by believing it's truly so. Like a little nothing kid like me could really do anything to keep off danger! Like I got any kinda power in me at all, that's *so* funny! That's so funny, I forget to laugh.

Then she's there. One minute I'm watching these feet going by, counting the high heels and the polished fancy shoes and the cool high-tops, and then being surprised 'cause there's this one pair of scruffy ol' blue bedroom slippers hustling past, and then all of a sudden the scruffy blue slippers turn the corner of the bushes and come right on in, and it's Granny Teeth herself.

Why's she want to come here like this, in daylight? I thought ghosts don't like the day. Maybe that's just evil ghosts as fear the light. I don't know too much, I guess.

"Corey, does it go well with you and this man?" she asks, like always.

"We're doin' good, Granny Teeth," I tell her. "We're almost there. Tonight's when we're gonna do it."

Granny Teeth nods. "His vow. He told my daughter of it many times. I often saw them sitting together, speaking. She told me he was a man who carried the burden of many ghosts, although he was guilty of none of their blood. To carry a ghost's weight is a heavy thing, child. No wise man does it willingly. It is done when it can not be helped, for guilt. But sometimes it is done for love."

"Sammy love your daughter?" I ask. Could be he *is* getting married. My stomach hurts around that.

She shakes her head this time. "His promise was made to *all* my family,

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not just to her alone. No one believed him but me. We were his friends; he told us he would be our shield. That vow was kept. When the soldiers left our village but came back later, running, frightened, all the eyes of the jungle burning cold into their backs, acting as if they did not remember who we were, friend or foe, he was the only one who stood between us and them—them, his own people!—so that we could flee their fear, the fear that killed first without asking, without thought, without—"

Granny Teeth sighs away the rest. "He did not love my daughter as you would think, child. But yes, he did love her."

I'm confused. "How come you say, no, he didn't love her, then, yes, he did?"

She squats down flatfooted so's we're eye to eye, and the shiny black of her eyes holds me so still I 'most forget to breathe. "Because, Corey, in this world there are as many loves as ghosts, and as many vows as loves." Then she's gone.

When it starts to get dark, I wake Sammy. I'd been thinking on what Granny Teeth said and I still couldn't make heads or tails out of it, so I decide it wasn't worth more trouble. Still, I have to ask:

"Sammy, what's this vow of yours you're gonna keep?"

He just says, "You'll see," and he stows his blanket and picks up his pack and takes my hand warm in his.

It wasn't far we had to go. Just a couple city blocks, and into some trees and out again. The moon wasn't up yet that I could see. There's this long stretch of flat ground, and a big lawn all crisp with frosted grass. Sammy says, "Sure did get cold early this year." I been feeling cold so long, it don't make much difference to me, but it seems like it matters to him, so I agree.

There's some signs. There's a pretty domed building near our end of the lawn, lit up white. There's this metal thing like a one-legged table, like the place where the preacher stands up in church and rests his Bible when he gives the sermon. Sammy goes over to it, and I see how weird it is, because instead of being a place you could rest a book on top of, there's this big fat book *underneath* the glassy top, see, and Sammy has to reach under to turn the pages. The book's chained down. Why'd anyone want to chain a book?

I guess Sammy was right 'bout me getting bored. I watch him turn the pages awhile, but he goes so *slow*. I look around some more. There's some people strolling in the dusk, but they walk right by us 'cause we're so raggedy-looking. Sammy says being poor's next best to being invisible. I look back at Sammy and I see there's some drops of wet starred out on the glass. I hope it don't start to rain again for real until we're done.

Sammy stands up straight, holding on to the edges of the glassed-in book like he's gonna preach a text. He even cries out, "Oh Lord!" like

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he's moved by the Spirit. But I remember he's a Jew, and I don't think they do it like that. His hands look mighty white, especially where they're grabbing hold. You can almost see the metal edges and the glass cutting through. I feel my whole chest get tight with fear so's it starts a black burning. I'm afraid.

When he lets go, I can draw breath again. He don't say 'nother word to me, just jerks his head so I know I'm to follow. We walk to this statue of three soldiers. That's where he lays down his pack and takes out a funny little thing, like a ladies' pockabook, almost, only it's flatter and smaller and it don't got a strap. It's white with blue stripes, 'cept it's so dirty the white part's just a guess. Sammy unzips it and takes out a book and a shawl.

He puts the shawl on his head. It's clean enough so's you can see it really is white and blue; got all these fringes at the bottom, but not all the way across. He surely does look funny with that thing draped over his head. "I lost my *yarmulke* a long time ago," he says to me, and smiles when he realizes I don't know what the hell he's talkin' about. "Never mind, Corey." The book's a clean blue and he kisses it.

There is a place in the earth and you go down into it slow. I follow Sammy, but it's like he don't see me no more. There's a sliver of black, shiny stone rising at our feet like a wave, and the farther down we go into the earth, the higher up the black stone rises. Sammy looks straight ahead, like he don't know the black wall's rising at his left hand. I follow him, and there's a scary tingling in my bones.

I look down at the gray walk at my feet because I don't want to see the wall. I tell myself *It's rock! It's just rock, what's to be afraid of? Don't be so stupid, Corey!* 'til I sound like Uncle John, so I stop. There's things on the ground propped up against the wall, bright things with some color to them besides black and gray. I see a flag, folded up so just the star part shows, all wrapped in plastic. I see fake flowers bound in little wreaths, bobbing stiff on wire stems. I see real flowers, touched with frost, lying on the stone. There's a wind that comes up and sighs down into the earth behind me, tugging at the little scraps of paper weighted down. One blows away, and something in me makes it important that I run and catch it and put it back by the wall. I can read the words, "We will always love you." Someone once said that to me.

I look up. The wall's taller now. I can just about see over the top to where the grass is growing. I can read the names in the wall, but they're just a lot of names to me. I look to where Sammy's gone ahead, deeper into the earth, his white fringey shawl blowing on the wind like a ghost. I wonder if he's going to go on forever, when he stops.

"Yit-ga-dal ve-yit-ka-dash she-mei ra-ba—" Sammy's voice climbs the

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wind and the wall and the night like a ladder of angels. *"Be-al-ma di-ve-ra chi-re-u-tei—"* All the words he sings, they must be the right way for a Jew to pray, 'cause I don't understand a one. *"Ve-yam-lich mal-chu-tei be-cha-yei-chon—"* It's his *voice* I understand. I can feel it straining for the sky, crying out, tugging at the one tip of God's sleeve that trails down out of Heaven. *Daddy!* he's crying. *Daddy, why'd you ever go away and leave me here alone? Oh Daddy, Mama, help me, save me, I need you, don't leave me! Mama, I'm so frightened! Daddy, I'm so cold!*

He's touching the wall down there. I shiver in my skin. Cold, too *cold,* the black shiny stone. Even up here, where I can still see over the top, I'm scared to get too near.

But that's Sammy down there. And now he's done with all his wailing prayer. He's looking up here, smiling for me, stretching out his hand. I look over the top of the wall at the grass, all cold-killed and withered. If I look hard, I think I see what's left of living flowers. I look back at Sammy, and then I run into his arms.

"Just one more prayer, Corey," he says to me. He still looks funny under that white shawl. "Just the one I promised them I'd say tonight. Tomorrow I'll see if maybe we can't find a synagogue'll let me in to say the rest of it, ask God to forgive us for all the bad things we've done. That's what this is all about, kid, no big mystery. My people have a special day for telling God we're sorry, that's all. I bet you understand about that, huh? Saying you're sorry, being told it's all right."

I understand. All except the part where you get told it's all right. *I* understand saying I'm sorry without knowing what I done, getting told sorry ain't enough. Getting *worse* than told, even while I'm screaming out I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. . . .

"But see," Sammy's saying. "See, when there's people you care about, people you've loved, and they can't stand up for themselves tonight, you've got to stand up for them. Anyhow, I promised them I would, back in 'Nam. This is a good night to keep promises. It's not just my sins I'm carrying tonight, but theirs. That's what we believe, that no man stands alone before God, that all of us carry our sins and our salvation."

He laughs. "Listen to me! Bugging a kid your age with words like *salvation,* when you probably don't know what I'm talking about."

I look at him very steady. "Jesus is my salvation," I say.

Sammy hugs me tight. "Good for you, kid. Good for you."

Then he's on his feet again and the words are pouring out. The singing's different, sadder than before: pleading, but not like a whipped dog's eyes beg you not to hit him any more. More like knowing you've hurt the one person you love best in all the world and you want to make it be all right again. Like all the pain for what you've done wrong is pain you've given away.

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"Kol ni-dre ve-e-so-re, va-cha-ro-me, v'-ko-no-me . . . ." It's just Sammy and the wall. And the song. And maybe God.

I turn away. We're deep into the earth now, the wall's above my head. There's light behind us, cutting all the names so deep it's like the letters are a blacker black than the wall that's frozen 'round them. If I bring my nose up close to the stone, I can see that the black ain't all black. There's little flecks of light caught there, gold and silver, like it snowed stars.

Black. Black and shiny over me. Black and shiny against my eyes, against my mouth, covering me, making me fight for air, fight for each last, burning breath. Black like the names are cut black, black without the shimmer or speck of a star to light my eyes. Black letters in the wall, black burning my eyes with what they say, black that's wrapping me all 'round so that I can't escape it ever, black and sharp as truth or waking:

SAMUEL NACHMAN

And out of the blackness in the words that spell out what's truly so, Granny Teeth's reaching up to take my hands. . . .

She don't talk, just leads me up the rising path. I feel the black wall falling away from me, and I smell the good smell of fresh-turned earth.

There's a man looking down at me. I'm scared, but Granny Teeth's got her hands on my shoulders and she pushes me up forward to meet him, up into the light. He's the same man I seen riding 'round town with Sheriff Randolph; deputy somebody, but I don't know his name.

Why's he looking at me like that? Why's he look and say, "Dear God," and all the color leaves his face?

I hear a voice I never want to hear no more. I hear Uncle John, shouting like he always does, shouting and stomping around and hollering, "I don't give a damn what kinda warrant you got, you get the hell off my land before I—"

Then he sees me, too, and all the color that left the deputy's face seems to want to flood into his. I try to pull back, but Granny Teeth won't let me. Maybe she won't let Uncle John hurt me no more neither. I try to face him and be brave.

But it's so hard, having to look at Uncle John again, seeing the deputy's face go hard as stone, watching him turn and crack Uncle John across the jaw like Uncle John once did to me. Uncle John falls down and puts his hands on his face. Jesus, don't let him lay the blame for this on me too!

Granny Teeth's whispering in my ear so soft I can hear the gold in her mouth go *tappa-tap*. "This day all vows are fulfilled," she tells me. "This day all debts are paid." And she makes me go stand beside the deputy, over Uncle John, and beside Sheriff Randolph, who's just come out of our house. He don't look too strong either, for such a big man.

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Deputy says, "Under the oak tree. Just like she told us. He had him wrapped up in a plastic garbage bag. Like he was trash. Just like that poor little boy wasn't nothing but trash!" Then: "He tripped," meaning Uncle John. I ain't gonna be the one to call it a lie. He's smiling like he's done something good, even if he got no real joy from it.

But Sheriff Randolph says, "You know the woman who called to tell us 'bout—" He don't say what, just jerks his head. I turn in spite of Granny Teeth holding me still and see he's nodding at our old oak. Someone's been messing 'round, digging up by the roots. The smell of home earth blankets me moist and cool.

"Yeah, from New York, that old Vietnamese lady, Mrs. Tran," the deputy says. "I couldn't hardly understand her."

"I don't wonder." The sheriff takes off his hat, wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. "I just called back to tell her what we found. I got her daughter on the line. Mrs. Tran's been six months comatose in the hospital."

"Yeah, but today—"

"Last night she died."

Who died? Who they mean died? I turn around real sharp, but all I see in front of me's the wall. I put out my hands to hold it back, but it rears up above my head and crashes over onto me. I cry out when I feel the blackness fall across my face again, because now I know, I really *know* what's been lies and what's so, and why the blackness won't ever let me go.

"Corey . . . "

In the dark, a voice. He's there. Sammy's there beyond the wall, reaching out his hands to me. And Granny Teeth, she's with him, holding out the edges of dead Sammy's white shawl like they was wings. First I just stare; I'm afraid of ghosts. Then I take me a deep breath and throw myself heart first against the wall, shatter it, plunge through the cold black surface to meet them. The black closes around me, but it's kept away by the circle of their arms. And wings; all around us, wings: Sammy's wings, Granny Teeth's wings, wings of glory, wings of prayer, shining white wings like the sword of God to cut away the blackness and wrap me in the warmth and the love and the light forever. ●

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BURGER LOVE

by Robert Reed

"Utility Man" (November 1990), Robert Reed's first story for *Asimov's,* was a finalist for the 1991 Hugo award. Earlier this year, Bantam Books published *The Remarkables,* a novel by Mr. Reed, and he is currently working on three others—all of which are strange.

They meet in the midst of one of the endless festivals that are always going on in that roaring zone of torn space-time where truly intelligent organisms feel most at home. They are nervous at first, then giddy with excitement. Strange, isn't it? Both of them feel a distinct bonding here, a shared sameness, and what can it mean? Do they have the same friends? Perhaps? But no, one of them just emerged from the local wormhole. Everyone here is a stranger, and a festival is a good way to meet and mingle, growing accustomed to the neighborhood. Yet it is odd, this almost instinctive familiarity between them. Odd and bewitching, and before another nanosecond is finished, their relationship has been consummated in the imaginative and slightly perversive ways of all authentic intelligences.

Now passion mingles with curiosity. They simplify their shapes, talking with a new intimacy, and somewhere in the midst of that intimacy, without warning, both confess to being born as first-generation entities. They both began life as simple water-and-protein sacks, slow-living and thoroughly primitive. Is this the key? The source of the sameness? Imagine the odds, they remark simultaneously; few of those in this crowded and ancient universe can make such a claim. Isn't it a wonder? It occurs to them that the coincidences might extend farther. Perhaps they origi-

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nated in the same galaxy. Wouldn't that be astounding? Relishing the suspense, they pause, and then, in unison, they emit a code, intricate and precise, that pinpoints their home galaxy in the remote past. The identical spiral! What a wondrous day! First-generation *and* from the same general neighborhood . . . Wasn't it astounding!?

Another pause comes, this one longer. The lovers cling to one another, smiling in countless ways and wondering what else might astonish them. Of course, it's far, far too much to hope that these coincidences will last any longer, and that's why they keep silent for a good while. Disappointment is guaranteed; more than seventy million worlds spawned true intelligences in just that lone galaxy. The same home world? Ludicrous, ludicrous! Yet both begin casting their minds back into the dim past, into simple memories almost never accessed . . . the strangeness of their cold, wet origins infecting them . . . and together, with that perfect unity of voice and tone, they say the same telltale word softly. The equivalent of a whisper, in a language long extinct. "Earth," they say. "Earth." A dusty, drab name for a metallic ball neither has recalled for ages—

—EARTH!

And what's more, they realize, they have said the word with identical inflections. The same dialect. The same hardness to the R, peculiar to a certain location and time. Home was a city in the midst of a powerful nation-state—the dominant state of its day—and each asks the other: "When were you born? And where?" They were born two months apart, in the same ward of the city's largest hospital, and aren't these the most incredible coincidences? Remarkable and bizarre. And sobering! The very oldest memories burst to the surface, and neither of them speaks for several nanoseconds. The shock has made them mute. Weak. But then again, they reason, they are immortals. Blessed with infinite amounts of time, why *couldn't* they happen upon one another? Everything is possible when given enough chances. Life is built from coincidences, and this is life at its best. Unexpected and thrilling; sweet and intoxicating.

Finally one asks the other, "When you were human . . . what was your name?"

"Peach," she replies. "Peach Norton."

And Peach's lover sees a distant face, hears a voice. "You were freckled," he says, "with big hornrimmed glasses and bowed legs and red hair all squiggly and tied back—"

"You remember me!?"

The same age; the same class in school. He sees foggy memories dimmed by years inside a crude liquid brain, but after a long search he uncovers something not so foggy. Clear, in fact. What's this? It seems to be a large colorless image made during school—third grade—outdoors and in warm weather. A photograph with a handwritten date in the

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lower right-hand corner. He can recall the brittle, sharp-tongued teacher herding them downstairs and assembling them on the choir bleachers, tall children to the back and Peach down front, standing above the date, and he can see every detail. He must have kept the photograph for decades; and when he was an old man, his brain being transferred into digital traces, he had included the memento of that day along with the imperfect human memories. Of course! But it's too much to hope that Peach did the same thing; coincidence can be carried only so far, after all—

"I can see that picture too," she interrupts. "I kept it the same as you did! For sentiment."

Peach wears a flowery dress that makes her legs look stocky. She and every other child smiles at the camera and the sunshine, and he almost feels as if he's there again. So real! There is an authentic immediacy, despite billions of years and uncountable changes—

"Which one are you?" she asks.

"In the back row."

"Right or left?"

He says, "Left."

"Boy or girl?"

"A boy. Short hair and big ears—"

"That's every boy!" she exclaims.

"With glasses."

"Beside Wanda?"

"Wanda Marsh. Yes." The name bursts out of various mouths. "I'm on her left—"

"You've got your head tilted. I can barely see you!"

"I was shy," he explains.

"Tom? Tom Johnson?"

"Then I was Tommy," he replies.

Another pause. It stretches on forever, nanoseconds on nanoseconds, then Peach finally asks, "So how have you been, Tommy?"

"Basically well. And yourself?"

"No complaints."

They begin to laugh, and again they make love. And afterward, in a compressed rush of words of emotion, they talk about everything that has happened to them between childhood and this instant—in brief, of course—every event seemingly steering them toward each other's brilliant white limbs and warmth.

They were lucky humans. Both of them lived just long enough to benefit from each new advance in medicine and cybernetics. They are among the very oldest of the species' first-generation. Ceramic bodies

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were replaced with the current amalgamations of coherent plasmas; their silicon minds were refashioned with materials without human names. Then the species joined the intelligences of the universe, leaving Earth for the wormholes and glorious adventures. For festivals like this one. For diversions that they couldn't have imagined when they were mere children, well-dressed and well-scrubbed, grinning out at some long-dead cameraman.

Inside their null chamber, unwatched and curious, the lovers recreate portions of their old neighborhood. Ancient snapshots and yearbooks are buried deep in their minds, seemingly waiting for this instant. Mental packrats, them. A good approximation is achieved, and for a long while they drift down the empty streets and school hallways. Trees and dust. Is this how we lived? they ask each other. What a slow, boring existence! And frigid! Yet these most ancient remembrances still possess a life, and once they become reaccustomed again they feel halfway intrigued. This is their past, their common root . . . How can it help but be captivating?

Peach is first to suggest the logical next stage. Wouldn't it be romantic to build authentic bodies around themselves? Say as adolescents? The illusion of mortality and youth, and they could pretend they were in high school again. They could pretend to be on some sort of date. She smiles while making the incredible suggestion. She says, "Tommy," and he thinks how it's such a simple, nonunique name. Then why does it affect him so powerfully? He must be letting his memories take over, his old existence, immediate and potent. Of course he tells her, "Sure. Let's see how it feels." Then he says, "Peach? Will you go out to dinner with me, Peach?" and both laugh loudly, the first traces of human faces forming over them.

Tommy Johnson was Tom in high school, at Jackson High, and he had barely seen Peach in the course of three years. Different classes; different circles. He uses a variety of yearbook photographs as a beginning place, recreating himself down to the shaggy hair and the angry red blemishes; then he shortens the hair and cures his face. He assumes she'll do the same things to herself, wanting to impress him. Then he applies everything he knows about adolescence, building the confused and passionate and clumsy and painfully earnest soul that must have been him. He's so successful that for an instant he nearly forgets who he is and that what he sees is false. All of it. For that instant he is a seventeen-year-old boy standing on the little concrete porch, at dusk, ringing a doorbell while unconsciously running his fingers through his hair. Again and again. And his gut hurts! Like a bastard!

Peach's father opens the door. Obviously Peach took time and effort with him—a tall man with a crushing handshake and a fierce glare, the eyes warning him to do or think nothing impure when it comes to his

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daughter. Or maybe Mr. Norton is in a bad mood, thinks Tom. Brought back from oblivion this way, thrust into a frustrating existence. Either way, he curtly tells Tom, "She's almost ready," and then turns, shouting upstairs, "He's here! And bring him a comb, will you? He forgot his!"

Peach runs. In adolescence she was stout to the brink of overweight, and that's how she has made herself. The marginal cuteness of third grade has dissolved into an almost-plainness, freckles covering her face and blemishes between the freckles. She smiles and says, "Hello," and the father holds the door for them. Then he slams it hard as they walk to Tom's car, her talking about being hungry. So hungry. A good thing she's between diets now.

Tom drives a big Oldsmobile, gold and one window permanently rolled down, and somehow the night is chilly despite the summery wealth of green growth. He drives cautiously, remembering how many of their generation died early and permanently in collisions between these rolling monsters. He tells Peach, "I always hated cars," and she responds with a warning. "We're children on a date. Will you play along, please?"

There's a shrillness to the voice, and he remembers the girl in grade school. Argumentative. A teacher's pet. Superior and generally friendless, and that's sobering. Something he hadn't remembered at first.

They eat dinner at a local hamburger parlor, Tom making a show of buying hers. Authentic and virtually inedible. It's amazing what kinds of details are buried in their mental libraries. Sitting beside a large window, they talk and chew. French fries and soggy burgers and slurries of pop and ice. Traffic roars past on the street—random-faced people hunched over steering wheels—and sometimes Peach and Tom will alter a face, giving it to someone they knew in high school.

One time Tom notices a muscle car and its passenger, her face glancing at him and Peach while a hand waves, "Hello," in passing.

"Was that Wanda?" he asks.

Peach gives a little nod, pleased with her skill.

He offers a weak smile, dipping his head and painting a single fry with ketchup. Memories, once dislodged, cannot easily be controlled. It's a consequence of a perfect mind, he reminds himself. It's all he can do not to conjure up Wanda again, for himself, setting her inside any of a hundred different cars—

"What'll we do next?" asks Peach.

He sets the fry on this tongue. Is this really how ketchup tasted?

"Tommy—?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Let's go up to the park. Okay?" She's seventeen in appearance, but she has the instincts of a lusty immortal. Unless of course she was this forward as a young woman. . . .

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"All right," says Tom, nodding.

"Do you need to buy anything?"

"What do you mean?"

She rolls her eyes, then snaps, "Protection."

"Why—"

"We're trying to be authentic," she warns him. "Hey! Don't you want to do it right?"

Protection. Rubbers. He thinks about stopping at a drugstore, but he feels a reflexive fear. An embarrassment. Instead he just conjures them up, sticking them under the car seat; and he says, "I've got them already."

"Oh, you have?"

He says, "Uh huh."

"What? You felt that sure, did you?" She asks him, "Do you think I'm a tramp? Is that it?"

She might be teasing him, but he can't be certain. He says nothing out of caution; and finally Peach manages a sharp laugh, telling him, "Come on. Will you hurry up?"

Tom looks at the plastic tray. Three tiny fries remain, grease-soaked and golden. "Just a minute," he tells her. "Let me finish." Then he finds himself taking his time, applying the ketchup and chewing carefully; and sometimes, almost on the sly, he watches the traffic on the street, wondering when and if Wanda will come past again. As if she's real and free to move as she wishes. But maybe Peach will bring her past, he is hoping. Somehow that seems like a lovely possibility. Just to see her. For just an instant. . . .

Even with such perfect creatures as themselves, and particularly because they are in the midst of their oldest, crudest memories, there is a danger in recalling things incorrectly. Wishful thinking can precipitate all kinds of real-seeming dreams. But when Tom concentrates hard enough, it seems as if he can remember that entire morning in the third grade. He retrieves the light slick feel of his slacks and the cautious way he has worn his good clothes to school. No wrestling; no running. He is a shy boy, which helps. Last night his mother had set him on a high stool, using the whining electric shears that made the kitchen's black-and-white TV roll and turn fuzzy, his own fuzz falling to the linoleum and her telling him not to fidget, to look down, look up, and no, he wasn't going to look like a hippy tomorrow. No, sir!

His teacher is motherliness magnified ten times, then bolstered with the sensibilities of a prison guard. She expects her class to make two lines and file quietly down the stairs. It is critically important that no other class is disturbed, and she says with eyes and her stance that malcontents will wish they had listened to her.

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Chance puts Tom behind the tall girl with black hair—Wanda Marsh—and not for the first time she seems quite pretty and confident, more popular than anyone else he knows. Tom can smell her, walking close behind her. The hair smells like a pine tree, and he can't help but stare up into its blackness, desperately wondering how it would feel. Just to put his hands into it, for just a moment. . . . He has to breathe and hold his breath, controlling himself, grasping the varnished wooden rail above the stairs with both hands and Wanda below him, the back of her head even with his little round mouth.

The teacher assembles them before the photographer. She intimidates even the grown man, him offering a couple of words of advice before backing away, severely chastened for his trouble. And Wanda turns at one point, smiling, and says, "Stand beside me, Tommy. Will you?"

It means nothing. His mature self recognizes the whim of a little girl. Probably she enjoys her height and believes that she will look even taller beside a timid, slick-headed boy. Perhaps there are other motives. Whatever the cause, Tommy finds magic in the request. A bright scalding magic that reaches across billions of years and the deaths of whole galaxies . . . and he recalls her beside him, close enough to sometimes feel the cool perfect cloth of her dress, and once even brushing his forearm against her living meat and blood. Not cold. In memory she seems quite warm and warmed further by the sun, and never in his brief life, not once in the countless days and nights, has he felt such a sudden or thorough love for any girl. A *crush*. That's the perfect word. This taking of the photograph is like a ceremony, proper and stiff, and Tommy tells himself, "This is how a wedding feels. I bet so." He believes he can see into the future, him marrying Wanda and living in a house much like his house, and they have all beautiful children with long hair . . . and isn't it lovely to see everything that will be. . . . ?

The photograph is taken. Boys and girls squint into the camera lens, their reflected light transcribed into chemicals and recorded for the ages, the image clear and crisp and almost shadowless. Cherubic faces scarcely hint what they are thinking at that instant. Not even Tommy's face, his head cocked to one side, almost resting on Wanda's shoulder, his expression barely worthy of the love and vision he holds within himself. And then the moment passes. If memory serves, after the *click* Wanda reaches around him and smacks Jason Meers on the shoulder. Wanda has a crush on Jason, and the physical blow proves as much. Jason stands on Tommy's left, and both he and she drop to the ground, giggling and using fists. And their teacher earns Tommy's eternal thanks, noticing them and storming around to the back, shouting, "What is this? What's going on here? Stop that! Stop! You two . . . you should be *ashamed!*"

* * *

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They have made love three times with their adolescent bodies, although the last event wasn't particularly successful. Flesh tires, and now Tom turns on the dome light and produces a fresh-minted copy of the photograph. Peach rolls down her window to clear out the stale air and the earthy scents, and she seems rather embarrassed by the primitive biology, and compliant. Their game is mostly forgotten for the moment. Face by face, they examine the rectangular photograph, trying to recall the fates of their old classmates. They summon newspaper accounts and ancient computer files. It's surprising how many of them stayed in the city or at least in the state. It's astonishing how many of them died young, not even reaching the century mark, and aren't both of them lucky? Wars murdered five boys and a girl. Cancer took eight others. There were traffic accidents, home accidents. They cross-reference social security numbers with obituaries—near-infinite memories working in tandem—and the totals are amazing. Grisly. Yet also heartening, particularly for Peach. "Aren't we the fortunate ones?" she asks. Then she says, "Yes. Yes, we are."

For a moment, no longer, Tom lays his finger on Wanda. In high school she was a cheerleader, beloved and worthy of the honor, and deep in his libraries he finds the newspaper account of her wedding to a championship swimmer. From Belgium, he gathers. Then she moved to Europe and vanished completely, her life and possible death out of reach. Except that Peach says, "I know what happened." He almost didn't hear the voice beside him. "To Miss Wanda Perfect," she says, an edge to her voice.

He retrieves the finger, then asks, "Who? What?"

"She made it," Peach snarls. "Didn't you hear? Her husband made a fortune, and she was one of the first people with every new trick. I thought you knew. When I was in the nursing home? Before I got my ceramic body? We saw Wanda in a magazine. . . ."

She produces a sheet of clumsy glass paper, thick and dated August 2056. A European periodical, he realizes. He hadn't committed foreign publications to his mental library. Too bad. He watches the glass glow to life, then sees a familiar face smiling out at him. Wanda Marsh. A different name then, and the ceramic flesh had that eerie smoothness. But otherwise she looked much the same. Apparently thirty years old, and he breathes in and says nothing for too long.

Peach retrieves the magazine, tossing it into the front seat.

Tom considers hugging her, pretending that it means nothing. But he's too much in character—a teenage boy not very distant from his infatuation—and there's also the memory of seeing Wanda tonight. In the car. He can't help but want to be elsewhere. He's tired of Peach's voice and her dumpy looks and her asshole father. He's seventeen and

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shallow, but even knowing that he's shallow doesn't help. Wanda, in a sense, is somewhere nearby. And this is her beginning point too. . . . She's alive still somewhere . . . and Peach has to realize what he is thinking. She must. That's why she retrieves the photograph next, tearing it into little squares and dumping them out onto the graveled ground. Then she says, almost quietly, "Once more," and grabs him, bodily pulling him down on top of her. "Now," she says. "Now!"

This is a kind of revenge, forcing Tom to copulate now. She's so insistent that he can barely concentrate on the duty, coaxing the young body into a climax and her telling him afterward to drive her home. He does so without speaking, pulling up to the curb and noticing a bedroom light burning above the front door. Peach eyes him for an instant, anger glazed over by a peculiar coldness. Then she smiles. All the sudden. And she says, "I heard her talking once. With her girlfriends, after gym class. They were toweling dry, and she told them that you were awfully cute. Just beautiful. If you just weren't so shy—"

"When was this?" he blurts.

"In high school." The smile enlarges, becoming something sharp. "Just last week, in fact. She said, 'Oh, that Tom Johnson is a dear. Cute and sexy. But just so quiet.' "

He says nothing.

"I just thought you should know."

He gives a weak nod.

Then she kisses Tom on the mouth, forcing her tongue between his lips, and suddenly she vanishes into a screaming white light more brilliant than a thousand suns—

"Sorry," he offers.

But too late. She is gone from the festival, into the wormhole and lost. . . .

He doesn't hunt for Wanda, not directly, but when he comes to a new festival he will find himself asking if anyone was born human or knows someone born human. No? Well, he explains, he was just curious. Never mind. And then he makes a point of enjoying himself as always, having brief affairs and long-term loves, the nanoseconds piling upon one another until millennia have passed.

He doesn't even think about Wanda very often. Not really. But some of his lovers notice the occasional distraction, and sometimes he has to lie to save himself.

It is insane to care.

Insane, he knows, and pointless. There are intervals when he works to purge himself. He belittles his memories of Wanda; he reminds himself that the infatuations of children have no weight. He even considers

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destroying the reconstructed Earth city, being done with it. Peach left her part of it, and he incorporated it into his newest library. He admits this to nobody, but sometimes he returns to the same hamburger parlor, eating fries and watching the traffic roll past, engines roaring and the random faces gazing at one another.

He doesn't search for Wanda, but he's saddened when she isn't at one of the new festivals. Coincidences have their limits, he understands, and it might be a trillion years before his lucky instant. . . . Yet hope is never quite ruined by rational thought. . . .

Ten millennia of disappointment, and again he buys burgers and the greasy fries, dressed up in that adolescent body and taking his usual seat. But this time something is different. He feels something wrong, something out of his control. He pauses over dinner, staring outdoors, and a familiar car slows as it passes him. He didn't make this car, nor its riders. He hears the big engine roaring, and the smoked glass windows roll down. Wanda Marsh sits in the back seat; Peach Norton drives. They are apparitions left behind by Peach, buried in the matrix of this illusion, and he'd never, never suspected that such a thing could be here. They were programmed to appear after a certain number of trips to the parlor—Peach anticipated *everything,* it seems—and now he sees the two girls kissing their palms and waving at him, giggling with mock affection—

—and suddenly something obvious occurs to Tom Johnson. Something he should have realized at once. Peach Norton had *lied* to him. That story. Wanda had never said Tom was cute, certainly not while Peach was listening, and the lie was a kind of revenge. Harsh and probably deserved, he decides. Yet the realization doesn't make anything easy.

The car makes a quick turn and passes in front of him once again.

He mutters, "Bitch," under his breath.

Again the girls wave at him, and they laugh; but Tom Johnson—the truly intelligent being—dips his head and chews on his burger, pretending not to have noticed them at all. ●

(From page 95)

Robert Frazier and **James Patrick Kelly,** and by **Lawrence Schimel.**

Don't worry, though—for those of you who agree with Scrooge *before* the Ghosts brainwash him, we turn away from seasonal concerns for the *rest* of our jam-packed December issue:

Veteran author **Tom Purdom** returns with a chilling look at a future Earth under the iron heel of alien domination, in "Sepoy"; hot new Australian writer **Greg Egan** takes us out on a tightrope stretched precariously between life and death, in a hair-raising little shocker called "The Walk"; critically acclaimed author **Lisa Goldstein** returns with a bittersweet study of the continuity of love, in the haunting

(Continued on page 229)

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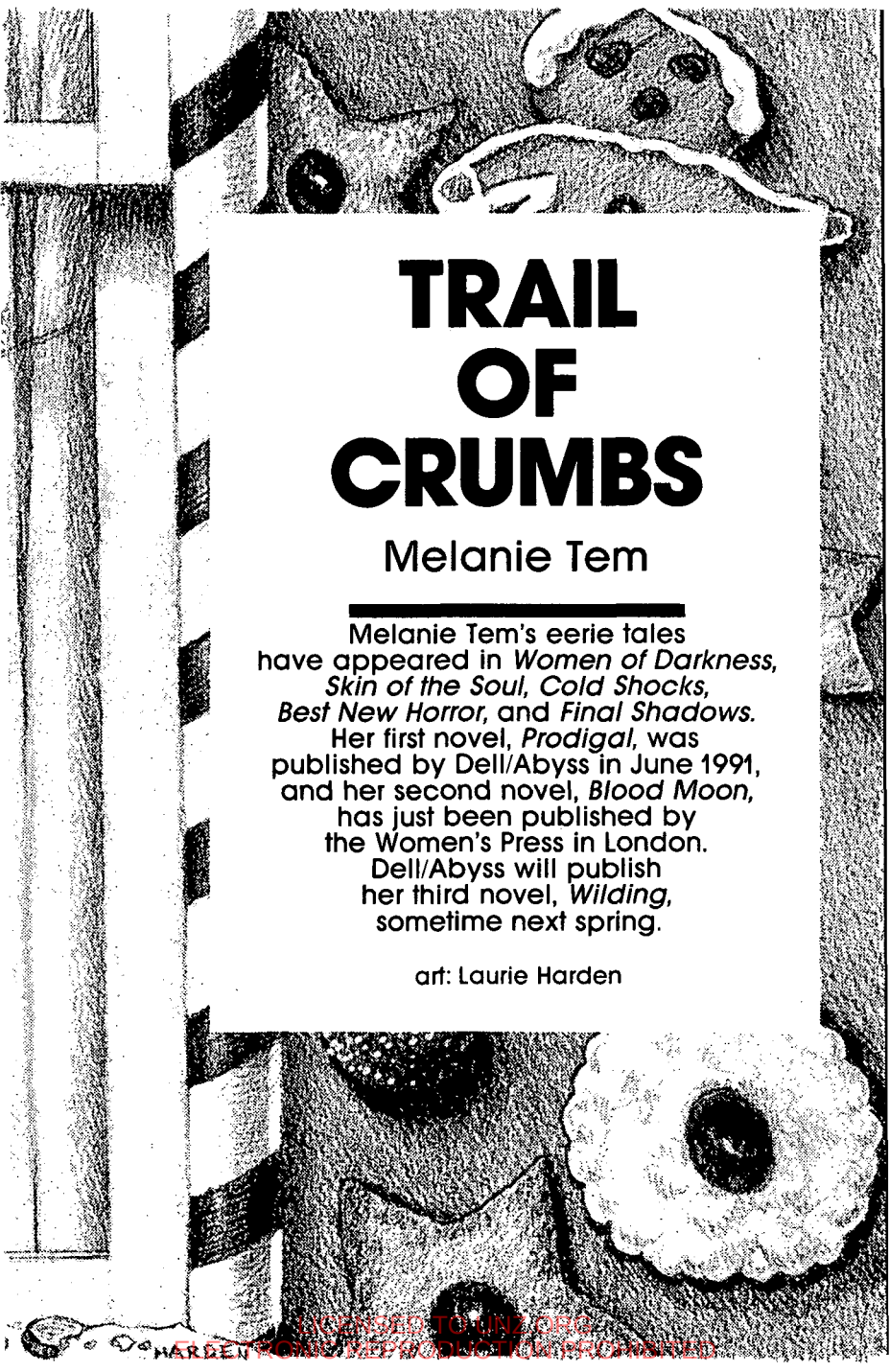

TRAIL OF CRUMBS

Melanie Tem

Melanie Tem's eerie tales have appeared in *Women of Darkness, Skin of the Soul, Cold Shocks, Best New Horror,* and *Final Shadows.* Her first novel, *Prodigal,* was published by Dell/Abyss in June 1991, and her second novel, *Blood Moon,* has just been published by the Women's Press in London. Dell/Abyss will publish her third novel, *Wilding,* sometime next spring.

art: Laurie Harden

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Sleeping in the daytime always made Nora lonely, as awakening in the night always enraged her. But for many years now, her needs for sleep and wakefulness had had as little to do with cycles of night and day as did her aging with the seasons. She'd lived so long now, slept and wakened and fed and defecated and hated so much, that she'd created her own cycles. She and Beatrice.

She woke up now to the cruel slant of afternoon sunshine, to the cries and laughter of neighborhood children on their innocent ways home from school, to the bent-as-a-claw silhouette of Beatrice at the front room window, and, for a split-second, thought that she would die of loneliness. But the truth was: she and Beatrice would never die, of loneliness or of anything else. She moved her feet, her shoulders, her pelvis, and the age-old arthritis sent pain into every joint; anger, equally ancient and equally vibrant, flared with it.

"Too young," Beatrice muttered. She'd let the heavy brown curtain hang crookedly over the window again and the dim room had darkened, but she didn't move away from the window just yet. A streak of dirtied sunlight fell across the ulcer on her shin; Nora could see that it hadn't yet eaten through to the bone. "All of them, too damn young."

Nora didn't entirely understand. They'd had children before. Beatrice had baked sugar cookies; she herself had filled chocolate pumpkins at Halloween, chocolate hearts at Valentine's Day, chocolate rabbits at Easter. But all that had happened a long time ago, and, no matter how long the two of them lived, Beatrice would *always* be older and wiser than she. "They'll grow," she said.

Most of them would, at least. A few of them would die along the way, but she and Beatrice most likely wouldn't know which ones, or how. The rest of them would grow older and bolder. Things would happen to them. They would be beaten, mugged, raped. They would get sick. Their babies would die. Their lives would not be fair. Then—drawn by curiosity, or by twisted kindness, or by a youthful and romantic desire for camaraderie with someone even better-schooled than they in life's injustice—one of them would eventually come to the door.

She and Beatrice didn't require much. One every few years would do. But it had been much longer than that now. Both of them were getting weak, irritable. Beatrice sat at the front room window nearly all day, a lonely old woman whose body was being eaten away but who would never die, spinning her web and waiting for somebody to come.

Beatrice hobbled into the kitchen. It took her a long time to get there, holding onto the wall and groaning with every step. Nora heard her struggling with the refrigerator door, heard her grunt when it finally opened.

Jennifer—the big Siamese cat who'd thundered inside one day when

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they'd opened the door for the mail, and who, since then, wouldn't let them get close enough to throw him out—came yowling from his lair upstairs, demanding food. The old lady next door, with characteristic foolishness and enthusiasm, had declared that this enormous tomcat looked like a Jennifer. The old lady was dead now, had died peacefully in her sleep. At first Nora couldn't imagine why Jennifer stayed. He certainly wasn't welcome. But Beatrice knew how to use him.

The flesh of Beatrice's leg ulcer was soft and wet to the touch. Remembering it, Nora closed her fist, and pain shot through her arm. It was all of a piece: this pain, and the horror of having to touch the sore, and the energy of her mind detailing all the affronts that had ever been visited upon her, and the degradation of her body in this malodorous bed in this webby and dismal house forever, with Beatrice.

Nora had been twenty when she'd first approached this narrow green house in the middle of the block; Beatrice, of course, had been ageless. Since then, the neighborhood had altered around them: the streets had been paved, there were cars instead of carriages and many more of them, the field on the corner where the circus used to winter had been filled-in with apartments of dirty blond brick, and the sirens at the fire station a block in the other direction sounded considerably more often. But much was the same, and, sleeping or awake, Nora remembered it as if it were yesterday, as if it were only a lifetime ago.

Barely twenty, and already her wrists ached in wet weather. Already she'd acquired a long list of ways in which life was unfair, in particular to *her*. She was nervous, wending her way up Beatrice's sidewalk; it was cracked even then, littered even then with the trails of other people who'd come to this house before her and, a few of them, left again. Popcorn. A shoelace. A bottle pointing haphazardly back toward the street. She stumbled. She caught a glimpse of the bent old woman at the front window—watching her, expecting her, *willing* her to come in.

Nora was on a half-dare, half-mission from her church youth group. Her coat pockets bulged with tracts proclaiming the imminent end of the world as we know it—which had seemed to her then both a logical and a comforting event to believe in. The tracts warned that the only path to God was through Jesus Christ, the only way to save oneself from eternal damnation was through His Word, as explicitly reported and interpreted in these pages. The path was well-defined and well-traveled, but it disappeared behind you one step at a time.

Vitriolic sentiments, from a faith enlivened and sweetened by rage. Now Nora recognized that holy hatred as both puny and self-deceptive, not at all up to the task at hand. Nothing, including the Revealed Word of God, could save anybody from eternal damnation.

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She suspected she'd always known that, although it hadn't come clear until she'd met Beatrice. She *must* have known it—from her father whipping her and then caressing her for being so beautiful, from the bleak mornings during the war when her mother had made her eat every last morsel of brown rice because there was nothing else, from the times her brother and sister had pulled her hair and pushed her down and broken her toys. She'd forgiven none of that, and she never would eat brown rice again.

Approaching the tall, narrow, green house that first time, bearing homemade vegetable soup and the Word of God, Nora hadn't forgiven anything that had ever happened to her, or anything that ever would. The tin of soup was warm against her belly, where nobody but she and then later, Beatrice, knew that a baby was growing, a baby that would die. A gust of wind scattered some of the tracts out of her pocket and onto the ground behind her, like a trail of crumbs leading out of the forest. Thinking to spread God's truth in any way possible, she hadn't tried to gather them up; by the time she'd been to Beatrice's three or four times, by the time she'd *stayed*, most of them had blown away or been discarded by the neighbors, and those that were left were indistinguishable from all the other debris leading to and from Beatrice's front door. The trail had been lost.

Nora knocked at the door. Although she'd just seen the old woman at the window an arm's length away, although she knew she was expected, it was a long time before there was any response—and then the door with its tarnished gargoyle head and chipped brown paint opened just a crack. The stale air of the house seeped out, dusty and thick; she sneezed and wanted to rub her face, but both her hands were full. Beatrice's hand, like the frayed straws of a broom, pushed out then; although it didn't reach her, it drew her in.

Beatrice had been talking before she opened the door, words strung together like spiteful bones, and she kept talking while Nora stood confusedly in the dim foyer.

"My first husband was a gambler, don't you know, lost all my money, and then my second husband was a liar and besides that not very intelligent, I had that marriage annulled after seventeen months, and then my *third* husband, he was a German soldier, and the law was you could not divorce a German soldier during the war, and so I moved to Canada. I told his mother, I said, 'Just you try to stop me. I'll sue you. I'll sue you *and* your precious son.' "

Her parchment face was flushed, her eyes wide and glinting through the haze of their cataracts and fixed on Nora's face. It was obvious that she didn't care about homemade vegetable soup or the Word of God,

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although Nora, not knowing what else to do, did finally leave both. What Beatrice wanted was somebody to talk to. She wanted Nora to stay.

That day, Nora had been able to follow her trail back out of Beatrice's house to the public sidewalk and home. But the trail hadn't held.

Someone was coming. Nora sat up. Pain wrenched, and her hatred—of her body, of the stranger approaching—soared.

Beatrice was in the kitchen again. Although it cost her much slow and painful effort to move, she was seldom still; even watching by the window, even sleeping, she pursed her lips, bared her teeth—all her own, arranged in a triangle like a beak—twitched her crooked limbs like a waiting, spinning, preying spider. The leg with the growing hole in it moved like all the others, and left a damp trail.

Now she was—Nora could tell by the sound—spooning honey onto white bread, pouring milk into the tall stained plastic cup. This was the meal they'd both been eating several times a day for years; neither of them had ever learned to shop or, except minimally, to cook, and it had been a long time since any taste but one had been distinguishable from any other.

Another layer of honey would be dripped onto the counter, laying a trail for ants. Another puddle of nearly turned milk would be splattered onto the floor. Another erratic trail of bread crumbs would scatter behind Beatrice as she ate and paced through the house. When Nora had been just visiting here, she'd fancied that one thing she could do for this troublesome old woman was *clean*, one service she could provide in the name of God and godliness. Since this house had surrounded her, too, cleaning had shown itself to be as pointless as anything else.

Someone was coming. A bundled figure was moving up the sidewalk. Beatrice said, "Ah!" and struggled more rapidly toward her place by the window. Nora set her feet painfully on the floor. Jennifer slunk downstairs to the first landing and readied himself, among the distinct but crisscrossing trails of spiders and mice, neatly gathered under his belly his unsheathed claws and twitching tail. Holding loosely onto the bedpost with both stiff hands, Nora dragged herself to her feet and took a few baleful steps toward the door where, surely, at any moment, the knock would sound.

Around them, and soon to be around the visitor, the old house was hungry and hot and charged as an oven, as a mouth, as a lair. All its surfaces were sticky with the detritus of the living creatures who'd passed through it in all its years: footprints of all kinds on its uneven, splintery surfaces; skin scales and minuscule clumps of hair on its grimy baseboards and wainscoting; feathers on the windowsills; shells and bits

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of bone in the kitchen sink. The air itself was thick, as if with mucus, as if with nerves.

Otherwise, the house was practically empty; there were few *objects*. It had been a long time since the last visitor who'd stayed, an Eagle Scout working on a service badge who hadn't been hard to seduce, who'd been almost eager for his fate. Nora presumed that his few leavings—teeth, a watch, a girl's class ring on a chain, pins and cloth badges now charred and out of place since the scarf to hold them had been burned—were still upstairs in the grocery sack where she'd stored them while she could still climb the stairs, unless Jennifer had thoroughly scattered them by now.

She herself had brought almost nothing with her the day she'd moved in, thinking she was merely making another dutiful visit to a lonely and unsaved old woman. Thinking, too, that she wouldn't be coming again, for Beatrice clearly believed that you had to learn to beat the Devil at his own game rather than running away from him.

But she'd been trapped, enchanted by the intensity with which Beatrice had recounted her life story, her many life stories, and by the sticky satisfaction of telling and retelling her own. They'd faced each other in the changing light and shadow of the brown-curtained front window, or lain together on the bedclothes that had been made into an amber mesh by years of dirt and body fluids, and they'd matched factual and imagined stories of the cruelties of life.

"When I was nine years old, my mother locked me out of the house. She always *said* it was an accident, she always said she was sorry, but I knew better. It was raining and dark and I knocked on the door—"

"When I was four years old, my father started having sex with me. He said it would be our secret, and it was, even though I told, I told *everybody*—"

"There was a nurse lived over there on Julian Street, she said she'd take care of me, she took my laundry to wash and then she said how much she'd always liked this house and would I will it to her and I said no of course not and then she wouldn't bring my laundry *back*. Since then, it's been years, I've only had the clothes on my back—"

"My second husband was a stupid man—"

"I'm pregnant but the baby's dead. It's just as well—"

"I had to have a plumber fix my toilet and he raped my little dog, my little Snowball. He did, I saw the evidence, her little vagina that should have been that big around was *that* big around and bloody. The vet said she'd been raped, but then when I asked for the records, I had a right to the records, I was paying the bills after all and it was my dog, my little Snowy, they falsified the records. But that plumbing company, they as

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much as admitted it, they paid the vet bills. Drexel Plumbing and Heating, don't you know, don't ever call *them* if you've got dogs—"

The stories had gone on and on, one complaint threading into another, making a web. Building into a powerful and complicated chorus which, like praying and speaking in tongues, uplifted Nora as she learned to sing it.

Actually, there was little else Nora would have brought with her that day even if she'd foreseen that she was going to stay forever. Bookmarks from her Bible that had once marked chapter and verse still worked their way to the surface every now and then through all the other litter on the floor, but their Scriptures were so faded and their referents so long lost that any trail they once had made, any escape—to the door, to another way of living in the world—was now just another disappointment, another strand in the web.

And Beatrice had long since emptied the house of all but a few items: the bed, the table, the set of carving knives in the kitchen that never needed sharpening. People had *stolen* her things from her, Beatrice was fond of insisting, but Nora had seen her give many of them away: an antique pocket watch to the Eagle Scout, fancy lace doilies to the coarse and dour neighbor who'd always mowed their tiny lawn without asking until the summer day he'd dropped dead of a cerebral hemorrhage, a gold-embossed Bible to Nora herself. "Thieves, all of 'em," Beatrice would declare, including Nora in her wild-eyed and self-satisfied ire. "Bunch of goddamn thieves and whores!"

There was a knock at the door. Beatrice got there first, although it took a long time. Nora watched impatiently. "Shovel your sidewalks, ma'am?" It was a female voice, cheerful, middle-aged. *Whore!* Nora thought quickly, and licked her chapped lips. Her jaw cracked painfully.

Beatrice was muttering, just loudly enough that the woman outside the house had to come a step closer to hear. "And you'll charge me an arm and a leg, won't you? I may be old and ugly, but I'm not stupid, don't you know, I'm not *senile*. This is another scam, isn't it, another way to take advantage of a lonely old woman, another—"

"No charge," said the voice, hesitant, wondering. *Fool*, Nora thought excitedly.

"I have no shovel," Beatrice declared.

"I brought mine."

"If you fall on the ice or strain your back or have a heart attack or something, I'm not responsible, don't you know."

"Of course not."

"So shovel," Beatrice said, and slammed and locked the door.

"Not too young," Nora observed. The house was dim again, but her

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eyes ached from the sunlight that had intruded. "Not too old. Not easily scared away."

Nodding uncontrollably, trembling with hunger and anticipation and extreme old age, Beatrice shuffled to the front window, where she could watch.

The Eagle Scout's name had been Matthew Washington. Nora always tried to remember their names; it gave her a form for her hatred, at first, and, later, her contempt. He had dark skin and close-cropped hair. He was short for a man, though much taller than either Beatrice or Nora; probably he hadn't reached his full growth.

He always wore his khaki Scout uniform when he came to see them, sash and pockets and shirtfront glittering with pins and rainbowed with cloth badges like small flags. His fingers would keep straying nervously to the empty spot which was to be filled with the service badge he'd earn for helping them. Matthew liked uniforms, badges, clear and efficient trails.

"He's not here out of the goodness of his heart," Nora told Beatrice one day when he'd gone and they were waiting for him to come back to fix the front step, to clean up the yard, to take their $22.38 in cash up to the supermarket and bring back a money order in exactly that amount so they could pay the water bill. To read to them, toward the end—neither of them was interested, and Matthew was a terrible reader ("a product of our educational system"; "what we get for our tax dollars")—but by then they'd run out of chores for him to do, and they had him thinking he was their friend. "He's not here because he gives a damn about *us*. He thinks he's going to *get* something out of it. A badge to fill in the empty space. That's all it is."

"Young people are like that," Beatrice agreed. "When I lived in London, there was a girl who had the flat below me—"

"Once I was crossing the street on my way home from the grocery store," Nora chimed in, "and a teenage boy—"

"—she had two kids, not much more than a child herself, and men in and out of the house at all hours, I'm surprised she didn't have a *dozen* kids, but then I know she'd had at least one abortion, and then she started acting friendly toward me but naturally I knew better than to trust her all she wanted was a free babysitter—"

"—he was a big tall boy he asked me did I have any spare change because he was hungry. Of course I didn't give it to him, you could smell the liquor on him, I just kept on walking as fast as I could—"

"—when she moved in with one of her boyfriends she stole my good silver teapot, just packed it up with the rest of her things, never even said, 'good-bye' or 'kiss my ass—' "

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"—he knocked my groceries out of my arms and grabbed my purse and ran off. I can't run but I ran after him as fast as I could. There were four or five other teenagers on the corner, laughing. His accomplices, laughing at me. The minute I got home here I called the police, remember? But that didn't do any good."

Nora was breathless by the time they stopped, and energized. Now she had given something important of herself to Beatrice and to the house, a trail wrapped around itself to make a web.

Matthew turned eighteen while they knew him. "Today's my birthday," he said childishly, hopefully, but neither of them said happy birthday.

For all his efficiency and responsibility, for all the straight and clear paths he had constructed for himself, Matthew was lonely.

He didn't fit in. He had no friends. Nobody liked him. The girl's class ring under the uniform was fake, one he'd purchased himself for four bucks at a pawn shop.

One rainy Sunday, they sent him to the grocery store for bread and honey. Nora insisted that he take the empty bread wrapper from the last loaf so he'd be sure to get the right kind, even though it smelled of mold, even though it embarrassed him. He stuffed it in the back pocket of his pressed khaki pants; the orange plastic tail of it dangled behind.

He was gone longer than he should have been. Beatrice stood at the front window the whole time, holding back the drape with her shoulder and hip; the ulcer on her shin was shiny in the light from the window, and it smelled. "He stole our money," Nora declared over and over. Jennifer crouched at the top of the stairs where he couldn't be seen; softly, he yowled, a round sound.

When at last they saw the boy hurrying back up the sidewalk, they also saw the rain-wet paper sack give way. The bread wrapper came unfastened, too; he must have been sampling their bread. Nora's outrage swelled nicely. Slices of the bread tumbled onto the sidewalk and grass, a soggy trail. Dogs would get it, Nora told herself furiously, or birds; if Matthew thought for one minute he could save himself that way, he was sadly mistaken.

As they watched, he stopped in the rain, hesitated as if he didn't know where he was or wasn't sure anymore where he'd been. He glanced confusedly over his shoulder, half-turned, even took a few off-balance steps toward the street. Nora held her breath. But it was as if he didn't recognize the way he'd come; he turned around again and came to their door. Nora let out her breath.

"It's the wrong kind anyway," Beatrice snarled, meeting him at the door.

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"They didn't have the other kind." He thrust the wet and moldy wrapper at her, as if in proof.

"You owe us a dollar and nineteen cents." Beatrice had all her fingers around his forearm; the sore on her leg fairly glowed. Jennifer was slinking behind them, his claws clicking like tiny bones on the uncarpeted stairs. Nora stood up; pain clawed through her elbows, knees, and hips, and gave her strength.

Matthew tried to pull away. Scraps of brown paper and the orange plastic bread wrapper were stuck in the honey that had dripped from the jar onto his uniform; he was still holding the mangled and incorrect loaf of bread. "I don't owe you anything. I was doing you a favor in the first place."

Beatrice and Nora shrieked together, and Jennifer hissed. "You owe us a dollar and nineteen cents!"

"You're nuts!"

"Thief!"

"I try to be nice to you, I feel sorry for you, and what do you do? You turn on me, just like everybody else in the world." He was swinging from side to side like the hand of a malfunctioning compass; Jennifer had positioned himself stolidly between Matthew and the door.

"Thief! Rapist! Murderer!"

"Witch!" His body was tensed as if for running, and he was actually moving through the house, through the thickening viscous air, but he was going the wrong way for escape; he had obviously lost sight of the door. "Old witch!" he shouted again, and, though it was the same word, its meanings now were more complicated, more convoluted.

He was a strong boy, but he was no match for the three of them. Beatrice applied the pressure of her accumulated years, and her fingers sank into the flesh of his arm as if it were already ulcerated, already dissolving. He screamed. Jennifer leaped, hissing and growling, onto the back of his head. Crouched low because she couldn't straighten up, Nora hurled herself against his knees. He went down with hardly any resistance at all.

"Would you like me to read to you? I could come over every morning and read you the paper. Or the Bible, maybe? Or poetry? I have lots of poetry books at home, and nobody else—"

"The pain is too great, don't you know. Can't you see that we're both in constant pain? How do you think we'd sit still that long?"

"What about cooking? How long has it been since you've had a nice hot meal? You have to eat to keep your strength up, you know. I could bring you—"

"We haven't starved yet, have we?"

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"It must be hard for you to do housework. Not that your house is dirty or anything, but I'd be happy to—"

"Don't you touch anything."

"Well, I'll bet you two have led fascinating lives. So long, so rich. I'd love to hear. What if I come over every once in a while and just *listen?* Would you like that?"

"No."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Does it make you sad to talk about your lives?"

"It—makes—us—mad!"

"I had a house but my sister stole it from me, don't you know." Beatrice's rheumy eyes flashed and her cheeks had acquired a soft pink glow. "Our mother left it to *her*, but everybody knew it rightfully belonged to me."

"We kept calling and threatening to expose them and finally they got somebody out here to repair our television," Nora said. Her heartbeat had quickened just enough to make her feel stronger, more alert. *"Two* men. No wonder everything costs so much. There was a fat Spanish man in a red plaid shirt and a bald white man who looked as if he never shaved and who smelled to high heaven. They took it to the shop—after all, it was still under warranty, so they had no cause to act as if they were doing two old ladies some big favor—but when they finally brought it back—*weeks* later, after we threatened to sue—it wasn't our television. They'd switched it for a cheaper model. They'd switched the little metal plate with the serial number, too, so we couldn't prove a thing. We gave the cheaper one away as soon as we could, didn't want it in our house. To somebody named—"

This woman's name was Margaret Cowling. Nora had had her spell it. She lived on the other side of the block, "in the little brown house with the weeping birch tree in front," as if they'd know, as if they'd been that far away in the last fifty or a hundred years. She'd moved there after the divorce because she couldn't take care of the big house herself. Her eyes filled with tears as she said that, and Nora watched attentively.

Margaret had shoveled all their sidewalks: the narrow one that supposedly connected their front door with the rest of the city; their short section of the public sidewalk between the Haverfords' six-foot privacy fence on the north and Max Doherty's perfectly trimmed privet hedge on the south; the cracked and heaved flagstone path that bisected their backyard. She'd shoveled and scraped them all down to the concrete, then happily followed these fresh paths home and back to their house again and home again, but snow was still falling hard and would fill them in soon.

She'd raked and swept up all the litter, all the trails. She'd taken out the two small white plastic bags of garbage that had been sitting in the

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corner of the kitchen since the snow had begun to fall. She'd washed Jennifer's dishes, under his distant and baleful scrutiny, and scrubbed the kitchen counter clean of coagulated honey and breadcrumbs.

"Do you know that your oven is on?"

"We know. Leave it alone."

Now she was searching eagerly, almost desperately, for some other good thing to do, some other way to help. "Tell us about *your* life," Beatrice suggested.

Margaret looked surprised. "Oh, well, there's not much to tell, really. I'm a pretty ordinary person."

"That's fine," Nora said. "Ordinary's fine. There's always plenty to tell in ordinary lives. Plenty of hurt."

"We don't get out," Beatrice said deliberately. "People don't come to see us much. We've lived so long we've used them up." Her laugh was a cackle, and utterly mirthless.

Like most of the people who got this far, Margaret Cowling needed no more encouragement than that to tell some of her life stories. "Well, all right," she agreed, blushing a little. "But you let me know if I'm boring you, okay?" and took her place in the dusty armchair that had been saved out for just this purpose.

Nora sank onto the bed, which didn't relieve the pain but spread it out so that, instead of concentrating in her joints, it suffused her entire body, and she welcomed it. Beatrice seemed to settle onto her haunches. Jennifer came partway down the stairs and gathered himself into a hunting posture, tail swollen and twitching, eyes glowing between the bannisters like yellow crumbs.

Nora had been right, of course; there was plenty to listen to, plenty to work with. The only truly dramatic cruelty in Margaret's life was her desertion by her husband of thirty-two years, who'd left her without warning or explanation for a woman half her age. But there were, as always, many other things just as useful, subtler hurts that less careful observers might have missed:

A younger sister, prettier and smarter than she. A drunken father. A car accident last spring that had been legally her fault even though the driver in front of her had slammed on her brakes without warning or explanation after the light had turned green. A windstorm last week that had torn a huge heavy rectangle of Engelmann ivy off the south wall of her house, taking with it soffit and eave and gutter—whoever had built the house and planted the ivy in the first place had been careless, and now everyone she contacted about repairing the damage quoted an exorbitant price.

"Good," Nora muttered. "Very good." Beatrice glowered at her for her indiscretion. Margaret stopped talking for a moment and regarded her in

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obvious puzzlement. Hastily, Nora said instead, "That's terrible. That's infuriating. The world is full of people just waiting to take advantage of you. You've been victimized. Go on."

Beatrice took over. "Years ago—fifteen, maybe twenty, don't you know—we hired somebody to fix our roof. Weaver Roofing, it was, at 4607 W. 39th; I have their card here somewhere, I'll find it for you. They tore a hole in the roof and climbed down into the attic and stole a set of antique crystal that was a present to me for my first wedding. Just lifted it up out of the hole they'd made and fixed the hole behind them so there wasn't any trace."

Margaret's eyes were wide. "Really?"

"They thought we'd never know, we were just two gullible old ladies, but we *knew*, we may be old and ugly but we're not *senile*, we know when somebody steals from us. Weaver Roofing had the gall to bill us five hundred eleven dollars and sixty-seven cents for roof repair. We refused to pay, naturally, and they threatened to sue us, thought they could bully us, but they never did, we never did pay, but they got away with the antique crystal."

There was a silence. Jennifer circled. Nora saw Margaret glance at him, then return her gaze to Beatrice. The dust and gloom of the house, its hot and viscous atmosphere, webbed across Margaret's face, her hair, her hands clasped in her lap, her shoulders hunched away from the crooked and lumpy back of the visitor's chair she sat in; she might have been tied there.

After that, she returned almost every day—to shovel, to rake, to tell about the bad things that had happened in her life so far and the bad things that would surely yet happen. Sometimes she brought cookies or soup, which they always threw away after she'd gone, or sometimes right in front of her; that didn't stop her from bringing something the next time, as if she couldn't believe what she saw with her own eyes. Jennifer crouched in the window of the lower landing and waited, growling and purring so intently that there was a sinister clicking in the back of his throat.

But something was wrong.

Margaret Cowling willingly told numerous stories of her own hurts and disappointments and willingly listened to many more of theirs, but the stories didn't enmesh—hers with each other, or hers with theirs. She talked about happy things, too, and often the hurts and the joys were the same event.

"It's not working," Nora kept saying anxiously to Beatrice. "Something's not working."

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"Some people make webs," Beatrice said, "and some people make trails. I think she's a web-maker, or can be turned into one."

At the end of each visit, she went easily away, leaving footprints in the snow, cookie crumbs in the spring mud, summer grass clippings from the quiet soles of her tennis shoes across their floor. Her trails in and out of their house lasted from one visit to the next.

And some of her tales, Nora noticed, didn't even have villains. "I have a bad toothache," she announced one day, and poufed out her cheek with the tip of her tongue.

Beatrice was instantly incensed, an opportunity seized. "That quack of a dentist out there on Sheridan pulled out all my teeth, I wasn't but fifty-three then, and when I was young I used to be beautiful, but you'd never know it after he got through with me. Damn dentures never did fit right. He had me coming all the way out to the office all that winter. He wanted to get into my pants but I wasn't interested, and don't you know he charged me a thousand dollars, look, I have the bill right here, a *thousand* dollars—"

Margaret shrugged. "Well, I always did have soft teeth. My parents used to nag me all the time about brushing."

"My mother used to make us all take baths every Saturday night in the same bathwater," Beatrice raged. "My father, goddamn his soul to hell, used to watch."

"*My* father always insisted that I eat every speck of food on the plate, no matter what it was." As she began the recounting, Nora was gratified to feel her anger become so buoyant that it swelled her diaphragm painfully and spread her throbbing ribs. "He'd always say, 'There are children starving in India,' and I'd wish I could move to India and starve to *death* just to get away from him."

Margaret was nodding eagerly, and Nora closed her eyes and opened her mouth in anticipation. "My father was a difficult man, too," Margaret began encouragingly, but then she added, "But I've come to see that he did love me in his own way, and he did the best he could."

Nora slammed her fist into the mattress, but the pain she caused wasn't nearly enough. Beatrice cried, "Damn!"

There was a pause. Incomplete webs hovered in the air, strands straining to twist with other strands, tentacles hungry and groping. Jennifer crouched low to the floor at the foot of the stairs, ears laid back flat.

"Well, anyway," Margaret said finally, "I have to go to the dentist tomorrow, so I may not be able to come and see you. They're working me in, which I really appreciate, but I don't know exactly—"

"You're just like all the rest." Speaking loudly and at once, before Beatrice could get to it, Nora curled her stiff torso more tightly on the bed, protecting and insulating the pain caused by her words. "Tricked

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us into counting on you, and now you can't be trusted." As she said it, it came to be quite true.

She had hoped for tears, for protests, for rage even. Instead, to her horror, Margaret smiled, came across the room with high careful steps, bent, and kissed her cheek.

"You fool! It hurts! I'm in constant, terrible pain and you touch me like that and make it hurt worse!" She was trying to shriek, of course, but her voice caught in her throat, and the truth was that the spot Margaret's lips had touched on her cheek was numb.

They waited then for Margaret to come again. Beatrice hobbled from door to window to kitchen and back again, leaving trails in the dust like a snail, muttering curses and litanies and prayers. Her ancient voice raveled in the darkness of the house and in its dirty light. The ulcer on her leg glimmered like a talisman.

"It's not working," Nora finally declared when Margaret hadn't come by noon of the second day. Jennifer was scrabbling upstairs; bones rattled. "We're going to die."

"*I'm* not going to die," Beatrice said grimly. "I'm not *ever* going to die," and Nora was somewhat reassured. Beatrice was far more experienced and resourceful, inconceivably older. Jennifer leaped onto the bed beside her, teeth bared, and sank his claws companionably into her shoulder, where her skin and flesh rolled as if they were barely attached anymore to the bone.

That afternoon, peering through the film on the front window, Beatrice announced Margaret's arrival. "Here she comes. She's *bringing* something again, goddamn her. Plants. Goddamn her. Get ready."

Nora nodded. Her breath was coming hard. Her head throbbed. The canopy of cobwebs over the bed snagged across her face. Pain cascaded down her spine. Jennifer was circling. Beatrice was making her way to the door, painfully but with some speed. Nora tried to stand, fell, crawled.

"Hi!" came Margaret's cheerful voice as Beatrice opened the door to her knock. Cool fresh air streaked in, sunshine and birdsong, and Nora flinched. "Fletcher's had rosebushes on sale yesterday and I picked up a couple for you. 'Sunshine' and 'Morning Mistress,' they're called. Yellow roses. I thought they'd look real pretty right here by your front door. I thought I could plant them today—"

"Get in here." Beatrice actually reached both clawed hands and the top half of her body out into the spring day in order to clutch Margaret's arm and pull her inside. Still crawling laboriously across the floor, making scuff marks through the dirt and cobwebs and husks of insects, Nora admired the older woman's courage, and, because of it, understood just how desperate their situation was. Jennifer's whiskers webbed and

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fanned as he slunk toward the door; he was shedding his winter undercoat, and bits of fur clung to the baseboards as he passed.

"Wait," protested Margaret, "you're breaking the rosebushes—"

"You look at *this!*" Beatrice shook in Margaret's face the stack of papers she'd collected on the newel post. With the other hand, she managed to pull Margaret all the way inside and slammed the door on them all. "You don't believe me, just look at all this proof! I may be old and ugly, but I'm not *stupid* and I'm not *senile!*"

"You're not ugly," Margaret began, but stopped. She stood in the gloom of the foyer, looking bewildered, the rosebushes in her arms. She hadn't noticed Nora yet, or Jennifer. Dirt had scattered out of the plastic that wrapped the root balls, and Nora thought she glimpsed minuscule, translucent green scales steadily coming loose from the stems.

"Here, here, look at *this!*" Beatrice yanked a sheet at random out of the stack; other papers fluttered onto the stairs and into the dimness of the foyer, but she made no effort to retrieve them and there were still plenty in the collection. "Read this! That damn doctor, that goddamn clinic! They say I owe them money, they say they'll take me to court, but they never sent me my records, they never told me what this was for! And now they want to cut off my leg because of the gangrene, but I'm not about to consent to that!"

Carefully, Margaret set the rosebushes down. She took the letter from Beatrice and squinted at it. In the doorway from the front room into the hall and foyer, Nora stopped to catch her breath, sank back onto her knees, and pressed her cheek against the warm, gritty floor. It hurt.

"Beatrice," Margaret said cautiously, wonderingly, "this bill is fourteen years old."

"Nobody's going to take advantage of *me!* Not while I've got my eyes open, they're not! Look at *this*, just you look at *this!*" She pulled another sheet from the loose pile on the newel post, then another and another, sending more crumpled envelopes and torn half-sheets into the thick air and onto the layered floor. Jennifer reached out a long spotted leg and, claws out, batted as if he were toying with a half-dead mouse. Some skittered; some settled where they'd fallen. The big, hollow-sided cat growled.

Margaret looked up and saw him, then saw Nora. She gasped and moved forward, lifting her foot high as though to step over and through debris, nearly losing her balance. "Nora! Did you fall? Are you all right?"

Beatrice pushed between them, waving a wrinkled sheet of pale blue stationery in Margaret's face. For a moment Margaret kept staring somewhat confusedly at Nora. Then her distracted gaze was on Jennifer, who was stalking her, back humped, ears flat, growl rising in his throat.

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"Read *this*, goddamn you, *read this!*" Margaret accepted the letter, bent her head close to read it in the uncertain light.

"I didn't know you had a daughter," she said finally. "You've never mentioned—"

"I don't claim her! She's nothing to me! Do you see what she *says?* Do you *see?*" Beatrice was beside herself with fury now, her frail hunched body contorted, her small foot stomping as if she'd make holes in the floor, her voice more a wordless cackle than a cry.

Margaret scanned the letter again. "She says she loves you, Beatrice. She says can she come and visit you?"

"It's a *trick!* She's a liar and a whore! She just wants me to put her back in my will! Nobody's going to take advantage of *me*, don't you know!"

The blue paper trembling in her hands, Margaret looked at Beatrice, Nora, Jennifer. "I had a daughter," she said.

Nora held her breath. Jennifer crouched.

"She died," Margaret said. "She was hit by a drunk driver. She was eight years old. He got two years probation."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Beatrice shouted. "Liar! Trickster! Whore!"

"I could never have any more children after my baby died," Nora wailed from her place on the floor, no longer sure whether the details were true, but surer than ever of the rage, the spreading enmity. "That doctor cut me open, sterilized me, killed my child, my little girl—"

"But I'm so glad I *had* her," Margaret said at last, and smiled, and suddenly Nora could hardly breathe, could hardly feel the distant hurting parts of her body. "I'm so glad our lives touched each other."

"Shut up!" Nora shrieked.

"Liar trickster whore," Beatrice was still chanting, but she'd lost her fervor and was swaying back against the dusty broken bars of the bannister. "Cheat murderer thief—"

"When someone you love dies, what you have left is the love." Margaret was almost chanting herself now.

Nora was outraged. She writhed on the floor. Desperately glaring at Margaret, Beatrice breathed, *"Witch!"* Jennifer was closing in, moving swiftly now, his body flat to the floor. Nora pushed forward, taking strength and purpose from the pain she could cause herself, although it wasn't nearly enough. Eyes open wide in her chanting, Beatrice had both hands on Margaret's arm.

"I'd better go plant those rosebushes before they dry out," Margaret said hastily, and fumbled behind her for the doorknob. "The man at the nursery said they'll likely bloom this season. Pale yellow and golden yellow. I thought you'd like that, you can see them from the front window

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without having to go outside. I'll tend them for you, I'm pretty good with plants, I—"

"Kindness!" Beatrice shrieked, an imprecation. "We don't want *kindness!* It's a *trick!* It's a *trap!* It *weakens* us! We may be ugly old ladies, but we're not *senile!*"

"No—" Margaret began, and then they were on her.

Jennifer was big enough that his front claws sank into the back of her head while his powerful hind legs grasped her waist. She screamed, twisted toward him. Beatrice flung herself into Margaret's face, hands and feet flailing. Nora wrapped herself around Margaret's ankles and sank her teeth into the flesh.

Then Margaret broke free of all of them, almost easily, shaking free of them, and ran out into the bright spring day, leaving their door wide open behind her. The rosebushes stayed drying and crumbling in their foyer, and her many trails were clearer than ever down their front steps and along their sidewalk, out into the wider world.

Nora didn't see Margaret's actual escape, because the moment the woman was gone, Beatrice and Jennifer turned on *her*. Nora saw fangs and fur, and shiny seepage from Beatrice's devouring wound, felt teeth and claws at her throat, heard a loud and swelling hissing, heard Beatrice insisting, *"I'm* not going to die! *I'm* not *ever* going to die!" Some people made webs and some people made trails; as the ancient woman and the giant cat dragged her toward the kitchen, where the knives never needed sharpening and the oven was always hot, Nora realized what choice she had made. ●

PLANET: FOR SALE

Over here, folks, I've got a little deal for you.
I'm practically *giving* this one away!
Economy-sized, oxygen-based, 70 percent water,
It's a terrific buy!
What, you think it's too good to be true?
Well, I admit, it's got a few bugs.
The ozone is gone, there's not much clean water left,
Almost all life is dead . . . but that doesn't matter,
It comes with some nice scenic ruins!
Tell you what, you buy it and I'll
throw in a moon for free!
Any takers?

—Amy Cubellis

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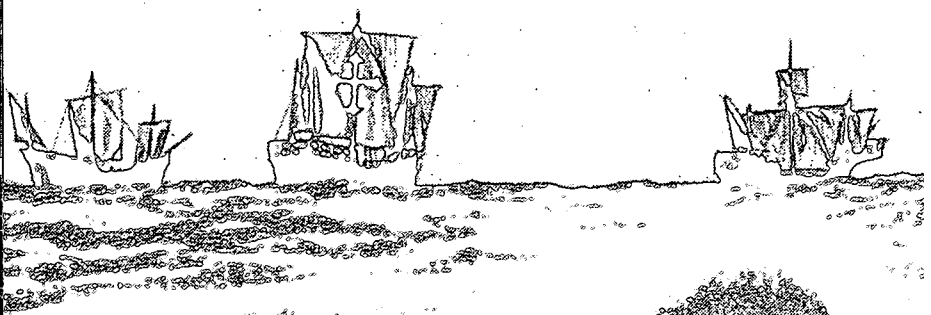

INK FROM THE NEW MOON

A.A. Attanasio

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art: Laurie Harden

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Forgive my long silence, wife. I would have written sooner, had not my journey across the Sandalwood Territories of the Dawn been an experience for me blacker than ink can show. Being so far from the homeland, so far from you, has dulled the heat of my life. Darkness occupies me. Yet, this unremitting gloom brings with it a peculiar knowledge and wisdom all its own—the treasure that the snake guards—the so-called poison cure.

Such is the blood's surprise, my precious one, that even in the serpent's grip of dire sorrow, I would find a clarity greater than any since my failures took me from you.

Here, at the farthest extreme of my journey, in the islands along the eastern shores of the Sandalwood Territories, with all of heaven and earth separating us—here at long last I have found enough strength to pen these words to you. Months of writing official reports, of recording endless observations of irrigation techniques, contour transport canals, factories, prisons, and village schools had quite drained me of the sort of words one writes to one's wife; but, at last, I feel again the place where the world is breathing inside me.

You, of course, will only remember me as you left me—that sour little man for whom being Third Assistant Secretarial Scribe at the Imperial Library was more punishment than privilege; the husband whittled away by shame and envy whom you dutifully bid farewell as he departed in that sorry delegation sent to examine the social structure of the Sandalwood Territories of the Dawn (or rather, the "Unified Sandalwood Autocracies" as the natives have insisted on calling it since their secession from the Kingdom two centuries ago). Yes, I do admit, I was ashamed, most especially in your eyes. Only you, Heart Wing, know me for who I truly am—a storyteller hooked on the bridebait of words, writing by the lamp of lightning. Yet my books, those poor defenseless books written in the lyrical style of a fargone time! Well, as you know too well, there was no livelihood for us on those printed pages. My only success as a writer was that my stories won you for me. After our blunderful attempt to farm in the western provinces, to live the lives of field-and-stream poet-recluses, which defiance of destiny and station cost us your health and the life of our one child, all my pride indeed soured into cynicism and self-pity. I felt obliged to accept the Imperial post because there seemed no other recourse.

From that day eighteen months ago until now, the shadow of night has covered me. I was not there to console you in your grief when our second child fell from your womb before he was strong enough to carry his own breath. By then, the big ship had already taken me to the Isles of the Palm Grove Vow in the middle of the World Sea. There, I sat

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surrounded by tedious tomes of Imperial chronicles about the Sandalwood Territories, while you suffered alone.

Like you, I never had a taste for the dry magisterial prose of diplomacy and the bitter punctuations of war that is history. What did it matter to me that five centuries ago, during the beginning of our modern era in the Sung Dynasty, the Buddhists, persecuted for adhering to a faith of foreign origin, set sail from the Middle Kingdom and, instead of being devoured by seven hundred dragons or plunging into the Maelstrom of the Great Inane, crossed nine thousand *li* of ocean and discovered a chain of sparsely populated tropical islands? Of what consequence was it to me that these islands, rich in palm, hardwoods, and the fragrant sandalwood beloved of the furniture-makers, soon attracted merchants and the Emperor's soldiers? And that, once again, the Buddhists felt compelled to flee, swearing their famous Palm Grove Vow to sail east until they either faced death together or found a land of their own. And that after crossing another seven thousand *li* of ocean, they arrived at the vast Land of Dawn, from whose easternmost extreme I am writing to you.

Surely, you are pursing your lips now with impatience, wondering why I burden you with so much bothersome history, you, a musician's daughter, who always preferred the beauty of song to the tedium of facts. But stay with me yet, Heart Wing. My discovery, the hardwon clarity gained through my poison cure, will mean less to you without some sharing of what I have learned of this land's history.

We know from our schooldays that the merchants eventually followed the Buddhists to the Land of Dawn, where the gentle monks had already converted many of the aboriginal tribes. Typical of the Buddhists, they did not war with the merchants but retreated farther east, spreading their doctrine among the tribes and gradually opening the frontier to other settlers. Over time, as the Imperialists established cities and trade routes, the monks began preaching the foolishness of obeisance to a Kingdom far across the World Sea. "Here and now!" the monks chanted, the land of our ancestors being too far away and too entrenched in the veil of illusion to be taken seriously anymore. Though the Buddhists themselves never raised a weapon against the Emperor, the merchants and farmers eagerly fought for them, revolting against Imperial taxation. And out of the Sandalwood Territories of Dawn, the settlers founded their own country: the Unified Sandalwood Autocracies.

There are numerous kingdoms here in the USA, each governed by an autocrat elected by the landowners of that kingdom. These separate kingdoms in turn are loosely governed by an overlord whom the autocrats and the landowners elect from among themselves to serve for an interval of no more than fifty moons. It is an alien system that the denizens here call Power of the People, and it is fraught with strife as the conservative

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Confucians, liberal Buddhists and radical Taoist-aboriginals continually struggle for dominance. Here, the Mandate of Heaven is not so much granted celestially as taken by wiles, wealth or force, grasped and clawed for.

I will not trouble you with this nation's paradoxical politics: its abhorrence of monarchs, yet its glorification of leaders; its insistence on separation of government and religion, yet its reliance on oaths, prayers, and moralizing; its passionate patriotism, yet fervent espousal of individual endeavor. There are no slaves here as at home and so there is no dignity for the upper classes, nor even for the lower classes, for all are slaves to money. The commonest street-sweeper can invest his meager earnings to form his own road maintenance company and after years of slavery to his enterprise become as wealthy as nobility. And, likewise, the rich can squander their resources and, without the protection of servants or class privilege, become street beggars. Amitabha! This land has lost entirely the sequence of divine order that regulates our serene sovereignty. And though there are those who profit by this increase of social and economic mobility, it is by and large a country mad with, and subverted by, its own countless ambitions. In many ways, it is, I think the Middle Kingdom turned upside down.

The rocky west coast, rife with numerous large cities, is the industrial spine of this nation as the east coast is in our land. On the coast, as in our kingdom, refineries, paper mills, textile factories, and shipbuilding yards abound. Inland are the lush agricultural valleys—and then the mountains and beyond them the desert—just as in our country. Where to the north in our homeland the Great Wall marches across mountains for over four thousand *li,* shutting out the Mongol hordes, here an equally immense wall crosses the desert to the south, fending off ferocious tribes of Aztecatl.

Heart Wing, there is even a village on the eastern prairie, beyond the mountains and the red sandstone arches of the desert, that looks very much like the village on the Yellow River where we had our ruinous farm. There, in a bee-filled orchard just like the cherry grove where we buried our daughter, my memory fetched back to when I held her bird-light body in my arms for the last time. I wept. I wanted to write you then, but there were irrigation networks to catalogue, and on the horizons of amber wheat and millet, highways to map hundreds of *li* long, where land boats fly faster than horses, their colorful sails fat with wind.

Beyond the plains lies the Evil East, which is what the Dawn-Settlers call their frontier, because said hinterland is dense with ancient forests no ax has ever touched. Dawn legends claim that the hungry souls of the unhappy dead wander those dense woods. Also, tribes of hostile aboriginals who have fled the settled autocracies of the west shun the Doctrine

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of the Buddha and the Ethics of Confucius and reign there, as anarchic and wild as any Taoist could imagine.

When our delegation leader sought volunteers to continue the survey into that wilderness, I was among those who offered to go. I'm sorry, Heart Wing, that my love for you was not enough to overcome my shame at the failures that led to our child's death and that took me from you. Wild in my grief, I sought likeness in that primeval forest. I had hoped it would kill me and end my suffering.

It did not. I had somehow imagined or hoped that there might well be ghosts in the Evil East, or at least cannibalistic savages to whom I would be prey, but there were neither. So I survived despite myself, saddened to think that all our chances bleed from us, like wounds that never heal.

The vast expanse of forest was poignantly beautiful even in its darkest vales and fog-hung fens, haunted only with the natural dangers of serpents, bears, and wolves. As for the tribes, when they realized that we had come merely to observe and not to cut their trees or encroach on their land, they greeted us cordially enough, for barbarians. For their hospitality, we traded them toys—bamboo dragonflies, kites, and firecrackers. I knew a simple joy with them, forgetting briefly the handful of chances that had already bled from me with my hope of fading from this world.

On the east coast are Buddhist missions and trading posts overlooking the Storm Sea. By the time we emerged from the wildwoods, a message for me from the west had already arrived at one of the posts by the river routes that the fur traders use. I recognized your father's calligraphy and knew before I read it—that you had left us to join the ancestors.

When the news came, I tried to throw myself from the monastery wall into the sea, but my companions stopped me. I could not hear beyond my heart. We who had once lived as one doubled being had become mysteries again to each other. I shall know no greater enigma.

For days I despaired. My failures had lost all my cherished chances, as a writer and a farmer, as a father and, now, as your mate. With that letter, I became older than the slowest river.

It is likely I would have stayed at the monastery and accepted monkhood had not news come one day announcing the arrival of strangers from across the Storm Sea. Numb, indifferent, I sailed south with the delegation's other volunteers. Autumn had come to the forest. Disheveled oaks and maples mottled the undulant shores. But gradually the hoarfrost thinned from the air, and colossal domes of cumulus rose from the horizon. Shaggy cypress and palm trees tilted above the dunes.

Like a roving, masterless dog, I followed the others from one mission to the next among lovely, verdant islands. Hunger abandoned me, and I ate only when food was pressed on me, not tasting it. In the silence and

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fire of night, while the others slept, my life seemed an endless web of lies I had spun and you a bird I had caught and crippled. In the mirrors of the sea, I saw faces. Mostly they were your face. And always when I saw you, you smiled at me with an untellable love. I grieved that I had ever left you.

The morning we found the boats that had crossed the Storm Sea, I greeted the strangers morosely. They were stout men with florid faces, thick beards, and big noses. Their ships were clumsy, worm-riddled boxes without watertight compartments and with ludicrous cloth sails set squarely, leaving them at the mercy of the winds. At first, they attempted to impress us with their cheap merchandise, mostly painted tinware and clay pots filled with sour wine. I do not blame them, for, not wishing to slight the aboriginals, we had approached in a local raft with the tribal leaders of that island.

Soon, however, beckoned by a blue smoke flare, our own ship rounded the headland. The sight of her sleek hull and orange sails with bamboo battens trimmed precisely for maximum speed rocked loose the foreigners' arrogant jaws—for our ship, with her thwartwise staggered masts fore-and-aft, approached *into* the wind. The Big Noses had never seen the likes of it.

Ostensibly to salute us, though I'm sure with the intent of displaying their might, the Big Noses fired their bulky cannon. The three awkward ships, entirely lacking leeboards, keeled drastically. Our vessel replied with a volley of Bees' Nest rockets that splashed overhead in a fiery display while our ship sailed figure-eights among the foreigners' box-boats.

At that, the Big Noses became effusively deferential. The captain, a tall, beardless man with red hair and ghostly pale flesh, removed his hat, bowed and presented us with one of his treasures, a pathetically crude book printed on coarse paper with a gold-leaf cross pressed into the animal-hide binding. Our leader accepted it graciously.

Fortunately, the Big Noses had on board a man who spoke Chaldean and some Arabic, and two of the linguists in our delegation could understand him slightly. He told us that his captain's name was Christ-bearer the Colonizer and that they had come seeking the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom in the hope of opening trade with him. They actually believed that they were twenty-five thousand *li* to the west, in the spice islands south of the Middle Kingdom! Their ignorance fairly astounded us.

Upon learning their precise location, the Colonizer appeared dismayed and retreated to his cabin. From his second in command, we eventually learned that the Colonizer had expected honor and wealth from his enterprise. Both would be greatly diminished now that it was evident he had

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discovered neither a route to the world's wealthiest kingdom nor a new world to be colonized by the Big Noses.

Among our delegation was much debate about the implications of the Colonizer's first name—Christ-bearer. For some centuries, Christ-bearers have straggled into the Middle Kingdom, though always they were confined to select districts of coastal cities. Their gruesome religion, in which the flesh and blood of their maimed and tortured god is symbolically consumed, disgusted our Emperor, and their proselytizing zeal rightly concerned him. But here, in the USA, with the Dawn-Settlers' tolerance of diverse views, what will be the consequences when the Christ-bearers establish their missions?

I did not care. Let fat-hearted men scheme and plot in far away temples and kingdoms. Heart Wing! I will never see the jewel of your face again. That thought—that truth—lies before me now, an unexplored wilderness I will spend the rest of my life crossing. But on that day when I first saw the Big Noses, I had not yet grasped this truth. I still believed death was a doorway. I thought perhaps your ghost would cross back and succor my mourning. I had seen your face in the mirrors of the sea, a distraught girl both filled and exhausted with love. I had seen that, and I thought I could cross the threshold of this life and find you again, join with you again, united among the ancestors. I thought that.

For several more days, I walked about in a daze, looking for your ghost, contemplating ways to die. I even prepared a sturdy noose from a silk sash and, one moon-long evening, wandered into the forest to hang myself. As I meandered through the dark avenues of a cypress dell seeking the appropriate bough from which to stretch my shameless neck, I heard voices. Three paces away, on the far side of a bracken screen, the Big Noses were whispering hotly. I dared to peek and spied them hurrying among the trees, crouched over, sabers and guns in hand and awkwardly hauling a longboat among them.

The evil I had wished upon myself had led me to a greater evil, and, without forethought, I followed the Big Noses. They swiftly made their way to the cove where the Imperial ship was moored. I knew then their intent. The entire delegation, along with most of the crew, was ashore at the mission interviewing the aboriginals who had first encountered the Big Noses and drafting a report for the Emperor and the local authorities about the arrival of the Christ-bearer in the USA. The Big Noses would meet little resistance in pirating our ship.

Clouds walked casually away from the moon, and the mission with its serpent pillars and curved roof shone gem-bright high on the bluff—too far away for me to race there in time or even for my cries to reach. Instead, I ducked among the dunes and scurried through the switching salt grass to the water's edge even as the Big Noses pushed their longboat

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into the slick water and piled in. With a few hardy oarstrokes, they reached the Imperial ship and began clambering aboard unseen by the watch, who was probably in the hold sampling the rice wine.

I stood staring at the ship perched atop the watery moon, knowing what I had to do but hardly believing I had such strength. I, who had iron enough in my blood to strangle my own life, wavered at the thought of defying other men, even the primitive Big Noses. Truly, what a coward I am! I would have stood rooted as a pine and watched the pirates sail our ship into the dark like a happy cloud scudding under the moon—but a scream and a splash jolted me.

The Big Noses had thrown the watch overboard. I saw him swimming hard for shore and imagined I saw fear in his face. His craven face galled me! The watch, flailing strenuously to save his own miserable life, would make no effort to stop barbarians from stealing the life of his own people! For I knew that we would lose nothing less if the Big Noses stole our ship and learned to build vessels that could challenge the USA and even the Middle Kingdom.

I dove into the glossed water and thrashed toward the ship. I am a weak swimmer, as you know, but there was not far to go, and the noise of the watch beating frantically to shore muted my advance. The moorings were cut, and the ship listed under the offshore breeze. The Big Noses, accustomed to climbing along yard-arms to adjust their sails, were unfamiliar with the windlasses and halyards that control from the deck the ribbed sails of our ship, and so there was time for me to clutch onto the hull before the sails unfurled.

After climbing the bulwark, I slipped and fell to the deck right at the feet of the tall, ghost-faced captain! We stared at each other with moonbright eyes for a startled moment, and I swear I saw an avidity in his features as malefic as a temple demon's. I bolted upright even as he shouted. Blessedly, the entire crew was busy trying to control the strange new ship, and I eluded the grasp of the Colonizer and darted across the deck to the gangway.

Death had been my intent from the first. When I plunged into the hold and collapsed among coils of hempen rope, I had but one thought: to reach the weapons bin and ignite the powder. I blundered in the dark, slammed into a bulkhead, tripped over bales of sorghum, and reached the powder bin in a gasping daze. Shouts boomed from the gangway, and the hulking shapes of the Big Noses filled the narrow corridor.

Wildly, I grasped for the flintstriker I knew was somewhere near the bin. Or was it? Perhaps that was too dangerous to keep near the powder. The Big Noses closed in, and I desperately bounded atop the bin and shoved open the hatch that was there. Moonlight gushed over me, and I

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saw the horrid faces of the barbarians rushing toward me. And there, at my elbow, was a sheaf of matches.

I seized the fire-sticks and rattled them at the Big Noses, but they were not thwarted. The oafs had no idea what these were! They dragged me down, barking furiously. I gaped about in the moonglow, spotted a flintstriker hanging from a beam. Kicking like a madman, I twisted free just long enough to snatch the flintstriker. But I had inspired their fury, and heavy blows knocked me to the planks.

Stunned, I barely had the strength to squeeze the lever of the flintstriker. My feeble effort elicited only the tiniest spark, but that was enough to ignite a match. The sulfurous flare startled my assailants, and they fell back. Immediately, I lurched about and held high the burning pine stick while gesturing at the powder bin behind me. The Big Noses pulled away.

With my free hand, I grabbed a bamboo tube I recognized as a Beard-the-Moon rocket. I lit the fuse and pointed it at the open hatch. In a radiant whoosh, sparks and flames sprayed into the night. The cries of the Big Noses sounded from the deck, and the men who had seized me fled. A laugh actually tore through me as I fired two more Beard-the-Moon rockets. I was going to die, but now death seemed a fate worthy of laughter.

Perhaps the longtime company of Buddhists and Taoists had affected me, for I had no desire to kill the Big Noses. I waited long enough for them to throw themselves into the sea before I ignited the fuses on several heaven-shaking Thunderclap bombs. My last thought, while waiting for the explosion to hurl me into the Great Inane, was of you, Heart Wing. Once I had committed myself to using death as a doorway, your ghost had actually come back for me, to lead me to the ancestors in a way that would serve the Kingdom. I thanked you, and the Thunderclap bombs exploded.

Yet, I did not die—at least, not in an obvious way. Later, when I could think clearly again, I realized that your ghost had not yet done with me. Who else but you could have placed me just where I was so that my body would be hurtled straight upward through the open hatch and into the lustrous night? I remember none of that, however, but the watch, who had made it to shore and been alerted by the showering of the Beard-the-Moon rockets, claims that when the Imperial ship burst into a fireball, he saw me flying, silhouetted against the moon.

He found me unconscious in the shallows, unscathed except that my beard and eyebrows were singed and my clothes torn. Like a meteor, I had fallen back to earth, back to life. I had fallen the way stars fall, from the remote darkness where they have shivered in the cold down into the warm, close darkness of earthly life. That night, I fell from the gloom of

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my solitary grief into the dark of terrestrial life, where we all suffer together in our unknowing. Slapped alert by the watch, I sat up in the moondappled shallows and saw my forty summers fall away into emptiness. The ship was gone—just as you are gone, Heart Wing, and our daughter gone into that emptiness the Buddhists call *sunyata,* which is really the void of our unknowing, the mystery that bears everything that lives and dies.

How foolish to say all this to *you,* who dwells now in the heart of this emptiness. But I, I have been ignorant, asleep. I needed reminding that time and the things of falling shall not fall into darkness but into a new freedom we cannot name, and so call emptiness. All of reality floats in that vacancy, like the spheres in the void of space, like these words floating in the emptiness of the page. Words try to capture reality, yet what they actually capture are only more words and deeper doubts. Mystery is the preeminent condition of human beings—and yet it is also our freedom to be exactly who we are, free to choose the words our doubts require.

No one in the delegation understood this when I was taken back to the mission to account for myself. Grateful as they were for my stopping the theft of the Imperial ship, they were sure the explosion had addled me. I think the monks knew what I meant, but they're of the "just-so" sect of Ch'an Buddhism, so they'd be the last to let on.

Be that as it may, I sat there quite agog and amazed, awakened to the knowledge that the freedom to be who I am means, quite simply, that I am alone—without you. For now, it is meant that this be so. For reasons I will never truly understand, death is denied me. So what am I to do with this life, then, and this loneliness? This freedom to *be,* this freedom whose chances bleed from us, creates new imperatives. In the place of my failure and shame waits a gaping emptiness wanting to be filled with what I might yet be.

As I meditated on this, the delegation wrote an official missive admonishing the Big Noses for their attempted thievery and threatening to report them to the Emperor. The Big Noses, all of whom had escaped the explosion and retreated to their ships, replied with a terse letter of half-hearted apology. With no other Imperial vessel anywhere in the vicinity and none of the Autocracies' forces nearby, our host, the monastery's abbot, urged us to accept the apology.

In an effort to both placate and hurry the Colonizer on his way, the delegation decided to load his ships with all the porcelain in the mission, several remarkable landscape paintings, a jade statue of Kwan Yin, goddess of serenity, as well as bales of crops he had never seen before, notably tobacco, peanuts, and potatoes. By then, inspired by my lack of family and career, I had decided to take the poison cure required by my

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sorrow; I have, dear wife, forsaken my return to the Middle Kingdom to go with the Colonizer on his return voyage across the Storm Sea to his homeland.

Do you admonish me for being foolish? Indeed, the decision was a difficult one, for I had hoped to return to our homeland and administer the rites myself at your gravesite. But if what I have learned of the emptiness is true, then you are no more there than here. The path of the Way is a roadlessness without departure or arrival. I have decided, Heart Wing, to follow the path, to fit the unaccomplished parts of my life to the future and embrace the unknown.

The delegation strove in vain to dissuade me. They fear that I have gone truly mad. But I don't care at all. I know you would understand, Heart Wing, you whom I first won with the bridebait of stories written by the lamp of lightning. So, as absurd as this may be, I sit here now, writing to you on the quarterdeck of a leaky vessel named *Santa María*.

I can tell from the way he looks at me that the Colonizer is still angry that I deprived him of his booty, and I know he has only taken me on board with the expectation of getting useful information from me. But for now our ignorance of each other's languages offers me a chance to win the Big Noses' respect by my deeds—and to watch and learn about these barbarians.

In time, I will understand their language. I will inform their emperor of the wonders of the Middle Kingdom, of the achievements of the Unified Sandalwood Autocracies, of the glory of our people. And I will write again from the far side of the world, from so far east it is the west where sun and moon meet. And from there, I will send back to the kingdom and to the USA stories everyone will read, stories of another world, written in ink from the new moon. ●

The Physicist, Falling

The sunshine comes ninety-three million miles
to show the mysteries of your face.
From infrared to ultraviolet,
light finds you fast as anything can
but tells me nothing important.
Is this warmth I feel love
or just a brilliant downpour of photons?
Quantum theory says there is no answer.
To look is to destroy.

—James Patrick Kelly

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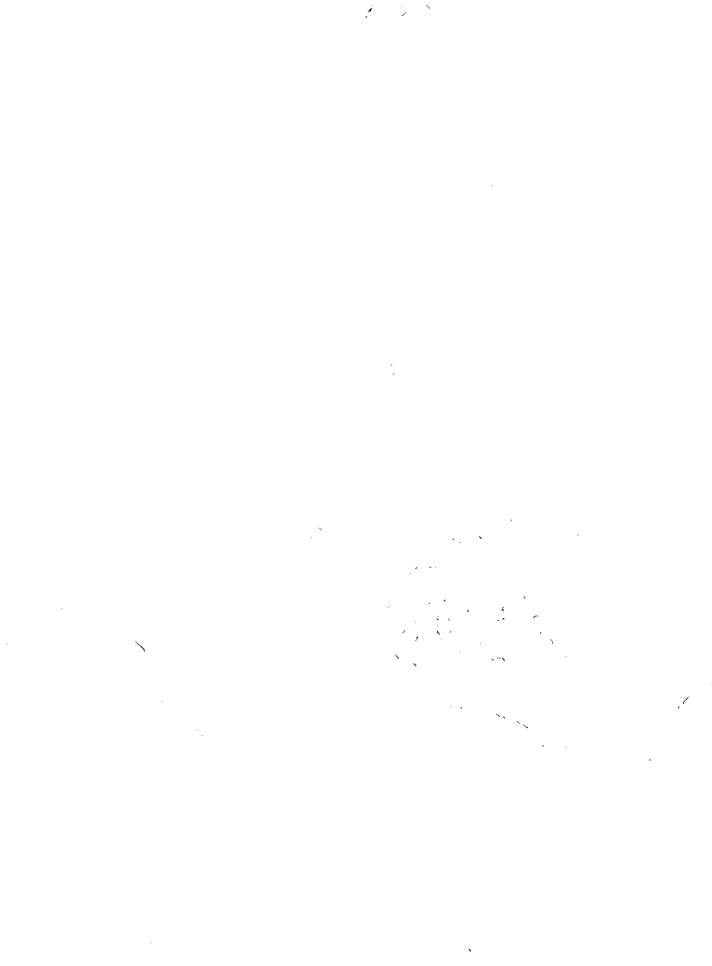

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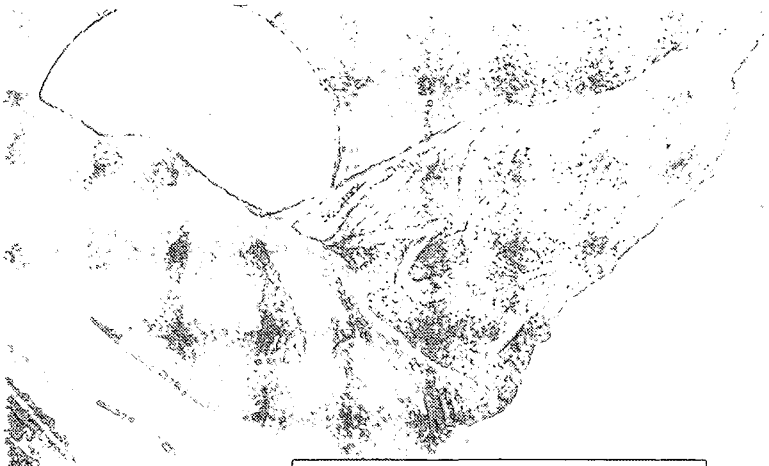

The paperback edition of Alexander Jablokov's first novel, *Carve the Sky*, was released by AvoNova last spring, and his second book, *A Deeper Sea*, has just been published in hardcover by William Morrow. The latter novel is based on a story that first appeared in the October 1989 issue of *Asimov's*. Mr. Jablokov is currently at work on a third book, and he plans to write a series of tales about his engaging character, Tessa, who makes her first appearance . . .

ABOVE ANCIENT SEAS

Alexander Jablokov

art: Laura Lakey

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Tessa Wolholme stood in the shadow of the twisted-trunked banyan that had forced its way through the cracked wooden foundation of the Calrick Bend railway station and watched the distant black speck of the hawk as it soared the updrafts over Angel's Butte. For an instant she felt almost embarrassed to be standing with two feet on solid ground. The hawk could look down into the wide, endless canyons of Koola's Western Shield with wide-aspect eyes, taking in with a glance journeys that took the canyon inhabitants days and weeks. If it wished it could see Tessa's sun-hatted figure, heavy suitcases resting to either side, and then, with just a slide of its eyes, examine the cascading roofs of Hammerswick School in its peaceful box canyon above Perala. The bird, a native of Koola, probably ignored it all, as it did the rest of the inscrutable activities of those alien intruders on its world, human beings.

It had taken Tessa two days to make that hawk's-eye-flick journey from Hammerswick to middle Cooperset Canyon. As she stood by the hanging rail, which still vibrated with the train's departure up-canyon, waiting for her brother Dom to pick her up, she realized she would never rest with a book in Hammerswick's quiet study garden again. That part of her life was over. Her mother was dead from a sudden, wasting fever. Tessa had returned to bury her, and, returning, would not leave. She felt as if her own life had just ended as well.

The hawk slid directly sideways, scratching its belly on the wind, and vanished behind the rocky plates that made up Dragon's Back. It did not reappear, and with the disappearance of its eyes, Hammerswick and Perala became definitively part of another world.

"Tessa!" a voice called. She hesitated, as if moving was giving something up, then left her bags and ran toward it.

Dom caught her up and swung her. Everything blurred but her brother's sturdy face, its tightly curled black hair quite unlike Tessa's looser brown. He put her down and they looked at each other appraisingly, challenge already beginning.

"Town life agrees with you." His tone concealed a hint of accusation, as if she had deserted them all. "You've filled out."

"Filled out" was one of those terms older people used to younger ones that Tessa never failed to find annoying. Dom was only eighteen. If he'd already started talking that way, he was doomed.

"I learned a lot there." She strove to relax.

"Oh? Anything at all useful?"

She tightened her jaw. "That remains to be seen." Not two minutes with him and she wanted to fight. It must be something about the way older brothers smell. Pheromones. That was it.

"So when will you be going back? You *do* want to go back, don't you?"

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Trust him to hit her most sensitive spot right off. It wasn't pheromones, it was just plain meanness.

She was too tired to fight. "I'm not going back, Dom. That's what Poppa told me." She looked out across the dense plantings of the twenty-kilometer wide Calrick Bend. The green-and-gold growth lapped against the sheer pink canyon walls, which, in turn, marched grandly off in either direction. This was her home and it had reclaimed her. "He needs me here. Now that Momma's gone—"

"Now that Momma's gone we don't need anyone else. You can just go back and study ancient interplanetary history or whatever you want."

"Now, Dom Wolholme, there's no reason to get nasty with me. I just got off the train. I haven't slept all night. And Momma's dead." To her dismay she found herself fighting back tears. It didn't make it any easier to see that he was doing the same thing. "Give me a chance."

"Sorry." Dom apologized the same way he washed dishes, a quick swipe and done.

"Fine. Please pick up my bags."

Without waiting to watch him, she hopped on the cart. The low-slung mule glanced back at her, erecting its vertebral spines, and flicked out a split tongue. It then returned to its contemplation of a grass clump. "If you don't decide to eat soon, it'll be too late." The mule ignored her. She was clearly a prophet without honor in her own canyon.

"God," Dom grunted behind her. "Everything I own doesn't weigh this much."

"A lady has special needs. For example, I own more than one pair of underwear."

Dom was too demoralized to come back at her and she was immediately sorry. Momma was dead. She could feel her family loosening around her. And God knew they needed to be tied together. Life on Koola demanded it.

Dom yanked at the mule's reins. It immediately decided that the grass clump was the most delicious thing it had ever seen, but had time for only one mouthful before it was forced, resentfully, to move off.

Calrick Bend was a wide elbow of Cooperset Canyon. The hanging rail ran above the high talus slopes that covered the base of the eastern wall, so Dom and Tessa had a wide, sweeping view as they descended from the station. The canyon walls were broken here and there by the terraces of tributary canyons, their outpourings marked by giant boulders. Hundreds of kilometers beyond were the frowning giants of the Boss. One could climb toward them for weeks and find them no nearer. Kardom, the northernmost visible peak, trailed a fine line of snow into a high wind, glowing in the morning light. Despite herself, Tessa thought it had to be one of the most beautiful places on Koola.

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They dropped into the vine-laced stillness of the fields and were closed in by plants. The lush, aromatic air here was not that of the high canyons and mountains. Tessa sniffed at it, trying to decide if she liked it. Unlike the thick air above the salt pans of the Great Valleys, deeper in Koola's atmosphere, this was an air made by human beings.

The mule maneuvered through the kinked lanes with the ease of long familiarity. Tessa found herself craning forward and, after a while, was rewarded by glimpses of the house through the fronds overhead. The Wolholme house hung from the cliff face, growing larger the higher up it went, like all farmer's houses unwilling to take up valuable growing land for the mere business of protecting humans from the elements. The morning sun reflected in its windows. It was a beautiful house, designed by her father, who should have been an architect rather than a farmer. As the wagon approached it, the plants grew lower, becoming the kitchen garden, until the entire house was visible at once, as well as the sturdy tower of the Wolholme family ward that rose beside it.

The rest of the family waited at the door. Benjamin, three years younger than Tessa's sixteen standard, stood and cried. He'd probably been crying for days. He always overdid everything. Standing next to Benjamin, one small hand on the doorway to keep himself steady, was Kevin, the youngest. He gazed up at Tessa with grave eyes. Looming over them both was Perin Wolholme, Poppa, a vast, balding man who stood blinking at her as if he had expected someone entirely else.

She regarded them with trepidation, for they all looked at her as if she was supposed to do something to make it all work. Then she jumped from the cart and put her arms around her father's huge chest.

Dom and Benjamin squabbled over who should carry Tessa's bags into the house. Dom, previously resentful of the task, won. Kevin trotted along behind, assisting with one hand under a corner of a suitcase, until he tripped in the doorway. He found something interesting in the pattern of the cut stone and sat there in fascination, completely in everyone's way.

The others went up the stairs to her room but Tessa stopped in the second-floor living room. Momma had been dead less than three days. The room was already a mess. Not blatantly, but Tessa knew Momma would never have left a clump of tree-training wire hanging by the door, or allowed anyone to set sprouting pots down on the rug. And who had dared to use one of Momma's large trilobite fossils as a doorstop? Tessa pulled it away. The door swung loose, obviously needing to be rehung.

Holding the heavy fossil, she walked to the window. Leafy trees with white blossoms and spiky calyx plants filled the view. On the canyon wall's next spur hung the great house of the Dalhousies with its many roof terraces. A figure strolled across one, serene in its dominion, but she

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couldn't recognize who it was. The Dalhousies were a large family. She held the trilobite up to the light. Segments gleaming black, its back was twisted, seemingly with the pain of its passing. When she had been younger Tessa had seen the random marks on the rock substrate as the traces of the legs' last frantic scrabbling. Now she wasn't sure.

"Benjamin!" It would do the boy good to have work. He appeared, sniffling. "Put those wires where they belong. Be careful! If you tangle them it will take all day to get it straight. And when you see him, tell Dom to carry these pots out of here. This is the living room, not the nursery. The rugs I'll clean myself. I can't expect you boys to handle anything like that." The last remark was unnecessary but made her feel better.

Enough delay. She climbed the stairs to her mother's room, trilobite under one arm as if to weigh her down. The door swung open at her touch.

Sora lay stretched out on the bed. It could not be mistaken for sleep: in life she had always slept curled up in a ball. She wore the long-waisted gray-and-pink sleeveless dress she had favored at the time Tessa left for school. She'd been wearing it during the last argument Tessa had with her. Tessa remembered shouting, feeling her face distend with anger, but try as she might she could not remember what the argument had been about. She turned and carefully placed the trilobite, a piece of evidence in that mysterious investigation into the ancient depths of Koola that had been Momma's abiding private interest, on the lace covering of the bureau, amid the keepsakes that crowded there, already dulling with dust.

Momma looked older now, without her quick movements to belie the face wrinkled by sun and wind. Her hands were folded prayerfully on her stomach. And—Tessa frowned—she wore her favorite sunstone ring on her left hand. In Tessa's life she had never seen Momma wear it other than on her right. Wincing at the feel of dead flesh, she switched it to the proper finger.

That was the sign for Tessa to see all the other incongruities in her mother's appearance. Her makeup was too emphatically applied, her lips an odd shade of red. Tessa remembered Momma bringing the tube back from some exclusive shop in Perala, laughing in dismay at the way it made her look when she finally got it home, and throwing it, not in the trash, but, as women do, back in her case. The slim golden tube had obviously caught some unperceptive male eye. Tessa wiped the makeup off with cream and re-applied it properly. Then the dangling earrings—hadn't it occurred to anyone that Momma was lying down rather than standing up? Finally, the X-belt just under the breasts was backward. She switched it around. Her mother felt light in her arms. Tessa let her breath out. Her mother was dead.

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Protesting voices came up the stairs. Vainly protesting—they had a tone of foreseen defeat. The bedroom door swung open, revealing the figure of a ponderous woman with a huge spray of hair, carrying a vast, shapeless bag.

"Theresa!" She dropped the bag with a heavy thump and opened her arms. Her voice was a resonant tenor.

"Dalka." Tessa hid her reluctance and slid into the embrace of her mother's best friend. Dalka's breasts were extravagantly large, the sort that dismayed rather than comforted men and infants. God knew they dismayed Tessa. In the face of this aggressive statement of matriarchy, her own womanhood became an afterthought.

Tessa didn't want to be forcibly comforted. She wanted to crawl away somewhere private to think. But she found herself weeping into Dalka's capacious bosom. "Oh, Dalka, I never said a nice thing to her. We just fought. What can I say now?"

"Hush, Theresa. No woman expects her sixteen-year-old daughter to love her. No sensible woman, that is, and Sora was as sensible as they come. She knew you'd understand eventually."

"But did she know I'd understand too late?"

Dalka just made a comforting noise.

"Dalka . . . can you help me wash her hair?"

"Surely, Theresa. It is a mess, isn't it? She was real sick and no one thought much about anything else." She opened the door, brusquely ordered a basin from whoever was standing there, and found Sora's aromatic shampoo.

Together the two women washed Sora's hair, set it, and dried it, as slowly and patiently as if it was an ancient ritual. The men buzzed around the closed door like disturbed wasps but did not dare intrude.

Finally they pulled shining threads through the hair, accenting the curving lines they had put in it. Tessa was astonished by how thick her mother's hair was. Her own hair was much thinner, but then she lacked much of her mother's beauty, being stronger and shorter, from Perin's blood.

Dalka picked up Sora's hand and pulled off the sunstone ring Tessa had just transferred there. She smiled grimly. "We want her to look nice, but there's no reason in your family's starving for it." She started to put the ring back in the jewelry case, then turned and put it on, with some difficulty, over Tessa's thicker finger. "There. As safe a place for it as I can think. A better memory of your momma than putting it under the fleshgrass at Topfield to be dug up by high plainsmen, isn't it?"

Tessa looked down at the ring and nodded.

Perin knocked. "Please." He held his hands in fists, an oddly aggressive posture he took in moments of nervousness. He peered over Dalka's

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shoulder at his daughter and dead wife, blinking. "The death cart is waiting. We must leave soon if we're to make Topfield—"

Dalka slapped his shoulder the way one man would another. "Do good by her, will you?"

"I will. Our family is strong enough."

"I hope you're right." She turned to look back at Tessa. In the dimness of the hall her eyes seemed extraordinarily large. "I'll talk with you later, Theresa." Tessa and Perin stood and listened to the creak of the stairs beneath Dalka's bulk.

"Well then. Well then." Perin stood over his wife's body and looked down at it as if he had found her napping and was wondering whether to awaken her. His large hands dangled loose at his sides.

Tessa started to move out of the room, to give her father privacy, but paused at the door, overcome by curiosity. Who were these people, her parents, and what had they meant to each other? Perin knelt by his wife's side and wept bitter, unashamed tears, sobbing so hard he sounded like he was hiccuping. He put an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, resting his head on her shoulder and disarranging her hair. Tessa turned her head away, suddenly feeling her intrusion, but not before she saw, with sick shock, that her father's hand held her mother's now-cold breast.

Dom and Benjamin stood stony-faced in the hall holding the funeral pallet. The heavy scent of its flowers, woven around the edge by the neighborhood women, filled the hall. It made Tessa dizzy and she put a hand against a wall to steady herself.

"Come in and get her." Their father's voice was muffled. "Come." With an air of exaggerated dignity, the two boys stepped through with the pallet. The men clustered around their dead woman and Tessa stood in the hall, watching their backs and wondering at their passions.

Like all houses in the Shield's upper valleys, the Wolholme house had a Death's Door at the rear, just under the cliff. It was used for the exit of a corpse and no other purpose, so that if the dead got lonely in their graves beneath the fleshgrass of Topfield and tried to return home, the only door they could find would be sealed against them. Characteristically, Perin had lavished great care on this almost-always-useless portal. It was surrounded by dark tiling and the doors themselves were carved with flowers. The foil-and-wax seal over it tore as Perin pulled back the bolt and the two heavy doors, perfectly balanced, swung open into the noonday sun.

Dom and Benjamin, strong, wide-shouldered boys, carried Sora lightly on her pallet and slid it onto the high, spring-wheeled death cart. They looked so manly and serious that Tessa suddenly felt overwhelmingly proud of them.

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A few of their neighbors stood among the trees to bid farewell, but most of the people of Calrick Bend would wait, prudently, until the Wolholmes returned from the burial, their success in carrying the body to its final resting place a reaffirmation of their strength as a family.

The cart was ancient and motorized, a common property of the communities of this length of Cooperset Canyon. Parts of it were rumored to have come, centuries ago, from Earth itself. They climbed aboard and hummed up-canyon.

Calrick Bend's community cemetery was at Topfield, in the dry, high valleys that backed up against Evening Crest.

Funerals were always performed by members of the deceased's family, a significant test of their strength, stamina, and solidarity. Failure to bury a dead family member at Topfield was an indication that the family could no longer maintain itself or its holdings.

Where Sterm Canyon split from Cooperset the road became rough, climbing the dry bed. Coiling tubes emerged from the red rock, turgid with the water they had sucked from deep aquifers, but no one farmed here, and only native Koolan plants grew. The canyon walls were defaced by old mining operations. Metal was rare anywhere on Koola, but particularly here on the Shield, a continent of light rock that rose up out of the dense atmosphere of the flats that made up the rest of the planet's surface. The embedded remains of heavy asteroids, a possible cause of the Shield's existence, were the only source of metals.

Tessa remembered the story of the Prochnows, who, weary, riven with internal dissension, had spent a week taking their father's body to Topfield, or so they announced when they returned with the cart. A few weeks later a hunter found the father's body hidden in an old excavation here in Sterm Canyon, at least two day's travel from Topfield, which they had never reached. The Prochnow family had been unable to survive the disgrace and had vanished as an organized unit. Better to die, Tessa thought. Better to die in the heights of Evening Crest, lungs drying in the merciless Koolan air, than have the Wolholmes end that way.

"Mother came here to hunt her stone bugs," Dom said, half sorrowful, half contemptuous. Indeed, the exposed rock layer flanking the jolting track was dense with a tangle of ancient Koolan sea floor life.

"She wanted to understand where we come from," Tessa said. The men in the family had never understood Sora's paleontological hobby. But that wasn't fair: Tessa had never understood it either. Now it seemed overwhelmingly important that she do so.

"We didn't *come* from here," Benjamin jeered, with the self-confidence of the possessor of an inarguable, school-approved fact. "We came from Earth."

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Tessa eyed him. "I remember when the midwife pulled out a little screaming lump and Poppa named it Benjamin. So I can tell you that *you* didn't come from Earth. Any further claims?"

"You know what I mean," Benjamin began heatedly.

"This is no time for fighting," Dom cautioned.

"Tell *her* that."

"No need," Tessa said with deliberate serenity. "No need, Earthman."

"I met her here," Perin said dreamily, as if his children weren't fighting around him.

"Momma?" Tessa said, argument forgotten. "Here in Sterm Canyon?"

Perin nodded. "She was trying to free a fossil. I heard her swearing before I saw her. She thought she was alone and was embarrassed when she saw me. But I helped her."

Tessa could almost see the scene: her impatient mother, young, at a disadvantage, but unwilling to reject the help, and Perin's large, careful hands working a chisel around the delicate, trapped fossil as he glanced, thoughtfully, at the odd woman he had unexpectedly cornered.

"Which fossil was it?" Tessa asked.

He frowned. "I don't remember. It wasn't very large. Kind of lacy. I'm sure it's still in the collection somewhere."

"And why were you here?" Dom and Benjamin leaned forward, while Kevin dozed, curled up with a hand over his face. Her brothers were equally interested in the answers, but were willing to let her ask all the questions.

"A funeral, what else?" He looked up Sterm Canyon toward the cliffs that marked its end. "*My* mother's, then. I had let the cart with my family go ahead, and was walking alone. After then, your mother walked with me."

"You persuaded her to come with you?" Tessa was distressed to hear the tone of doubt in her voice. But how had the gentle, shambling Perin persuaded the intent Sora to leave her task, her joy, and come with him?

For the first time since she had come home, Perin smiled, remembering. "No, Tessa. I wanted to go ahead alone. I had just stopped to help, nothing else. It was she who insisted on coming with me."

Clearly unwilling to answer any further questions, Perin settled back, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes. But traces of the just-passed smile remained on his face.

Before climbing to Topfield they spent the night at the funeral encampment, an open area around a water seep. One other family, with the body of a young child, stayed at the other end of camp, but the two families did not speak. In the morning, by unspoken agreement, the Wolholmes moved out at first light, taking the death cart as far as the base of the switchback Topfield trail.

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Just where the trail rose toward its first switchback was a pair of giant fossil trilobites, each about two meters long. An entire five-meter layer of the cliff face was filled with such fossils, but these were by far the largest, flanking the path like guardians. Centuries of human hands touching them for luck had rubbed them smooth. Her mother had particularly thought of them as lucky, Tessa remembered, representatives of the native Koolan forces that the human settlers had yet to come to terms with. At home was a photograph of a four-year-old Tessa perched on one, smiling nervously.

It was a long, heavy climb up the trail, trading off the weight of the pallet and their mother's body. The spiky plants along the trail twisted slowly when they sensed the moisture of the human beings. Tear-drinking flies, a symbol of funerals, settled on their cheeks to reclaim some salty water. After several hours' climb, Tessa leaned out and looked down the cliff face to the canyon below. The tiny figures of the family with the dead child were just commencing their climb. Their heads were down, concentrating on each step.

The cliff edge was sharp. One moment the Wolholmes were climbing desperately up the face, breath sharp in their lungs, the next they stood on the wide, fleshgrass-covered expanse of Topfield. Fleshgrass lived on the bodies buried beneath it. When this barren high valley had become Calrick Bend's community cemetery there had been only sparse clumps of it here and there on bare dirt. Now it lapped up at the distant hills as if desperate to climb toward the higher mountains that loomed beyond.

Dom led the family a long way into the valley before finding a spot, no different than any other, that satisfied him. The fleshgrass was thick under their feet. Dom, Benjamin, and Tessa pulled out the folding shovels that had been stowed under the pallet and marked the grave. Kevin had brought, on his own, a toy shovel and with childish concentration straightened the line of his older siblings' cut.

The soil beneath the fleshgrass was loose and easy to dig. It didn't take long to empty a hole deep enough for their mother. The roots would grow through her in days. As far as Tessa knew, clothes and jewelry would remain below, for all the tales she'd heard of wedding rings being found waving on fleshgrass fronds. It was also said that high plainsmen sometimes descended from their encampments beyond the Boss and dug through the ground seeking valuables.

They slid Sora's body off the pallet into the ground and covered her over. Tessa turned away as her mother's still face vanished beneath the dry gray soil.

"We'll survive, Sora," Perin said, kneeling by the grave. "Just like I promised you."

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Benjamin made an inarticulate sound in his throat and pointed. They all looked up.

No more than a hundred meters away stood a Great Wapiti, a huge quadruped, two meters at the shoulder, with curving, knife-edged horns. It was a native of Koola, though it had been given some approximate name from an animal of old Earth.

"My God," Dom muttered. "It's so close. So close!"

The wapiti stalked along, graceful and powerful, as if aware of their impotence and the solemnity of their task. At last, coming near a rock slope, it crouched and, with an incredible leap, vanished.

Benjamin looked after it. "Look!" He pointed. "A troop of high plainsmen. You can just see their horses. They must be hunting the wapiti." Tessa squinted to see what he saw.

Dom didn't even bother to glance up from pulling the fleshgrass over the grave. "Don't be ridiculous. The Plateau is hundreds of kilometers further, beyond the Boss. That's the face of Evening Crest, Ben, and there aren't any plainsmen there. You're imagining things."

"Am not." Benjamin thrust his lower jaw out in a gesture Tessa remembered her mother making while arguing with Perin.

"It doesn't matter," Tessa said. "We have to get back to funeral camp before dark."

So they turned and left Sora there beneath the grass.

The funeral ceremonies had been, in their own way, more strenuous than the climb to Topfield. First there had been the argument over which symbol of their mother's would be included in the Wolholme family Ward. Tessa hadn't quite dared suggest a trilobite fossil from the collection, and had found Perin's final, and inarguable, selection, Sora's favorite pair of pruning shears, eerily correct, despite its inadequacy. Tessa had tried to pick a fight without telling Poppa what it was about but he had not risen to the bait, as Sora surely would have, and merely stuck his thick Wolholme fingers partway through the fine handles and clumsily clicked the blades to show by the mismatch how well they had, in contrast, fit Sora's hand.

And after the attachment of the shears to the upper part of the Ward, there had been the feast at long tables under the low-hanging branches of the family dilberry grove. All the families of Calrick Bend had sent representatives, even the most-high Dalhousies and Minishkins, some closer friends arriving with all generations. Tessa and her brothers had worked desperately to feed them all the spicy-sweet cakes that were always served at this event and no other. Dom claimed his butt had forgotten what a chair felt like. But their weariness felt good, a prelude

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to relaxation, for the family would survive. Momma lay properly at Topfield and the Wolholmes were back in their fields and groves.

Now Tessa sat alone under those dilberries, right at the side of the Ward, and tried to think things through. She mended clothing as she considered, having learned long ago from Momma that no one would task her for wasting time on thought if she seemed to be doing something useful.

The Ward was a tower of family symbols, and one stood beside each house, a sign of the family's persistence. Some Wards had bases of mysterious, silvery metals brought from Earth, metals poor Koola could no longer make. And more than one Ward rested on a vivid green-blue sphere representing that far-away planet, Mother of All. The Dalhousies, for example, had been big on Earth, and wished this known. For all Tessa knew, they had owned that planet and come to Koola only on holiday, to be stuck here by an unexpected change of interplanetary transport schedule.

The oldest things Tessa could see in the high-tension ceramic matrix of the Wolholme Ward's base could not have been much more than a century old, more than two centuries younger than the initial settlements on Koola: an enamel portrait of a woman holding a child, a man's bronzed sun hat, and another pair of pruning shears, these with long, curved blades.

"Ah, Theresa." Though heavy, Dalka could move quietly when she had a mind to. She sat down next to Tessa and dropped her bag. "Now we can get to business." She paused, and frowned. "Why are you wasting so much thread on those rear buttons?"

"Benjamin catches them on trellises and rips them off." Tessa was deliberately patient with Dalka's interference even in trifles. She hoped Dalka noticed. "He likes to climb."

"We all do, when we're young. Well, even when we're not. At least that foolish city school Sora insisted on sending you to hasn't ruined you completely for real life."

Tessa felt the power and oppression of village life settling over her like a weighted bird net. "Momma had good reasons for sending me there. If the Wolholmes are to survive—"

"If the Wolholmes are to survive, dear, you're going to have to see to it. Sora, poor dear, married for love."

"Careful, Dalka." To her surprise, Tessa found herself on the verge of losing her temper. She carefully folded Benjamin's coveralls.

"Now, now." Dalka chuckled. "I'm not attacking poor Perin, darling. But you have more responsibilities than a lady should, and less help in carrying them out." She pulled something out of her bag and held it out to Tessa. "Recognize this?"

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"People call them judeflowers." Tessa looked at the bundled leaves and petals and remembered both her mother's lessons and her botany class at Hammerswick, though reconciling the two was sometimes difficult. "It has a false stem that's actually fused bracts." She raised her eyebrows.

"Goodness, what a clever child Sora raised. Do you know its uses?"

"No, Dalka, I don't."

"Oh dear, don't be so angry." Dalka put the flowers back in her bag. "They serve as a constituent of a coordinating enzyme substrate for fat-soluble vitamins. We use them to grow an intestinal yeast for hiking the back country. An inoculation lasts maybe two-three weeks, residing in the ileum of the small intestine. Enough for a good over-pass hike, if not to live permanently in the high plains. Lord knows how the high plainsmen do it." She sighed. "There are real mysteries up there, girl. They've done some first-rate enzyme work."

"Momma talked about that . . . but she never taught me."

"Of course not, dear. You were too young to appreciate the subtlety of it—and the subtlety's everything and why men don't fiddle with it." Dalka put her arm around Tessa. "Humans wouldn't be able to live on Koola a day if it weren't for the tailored yeasts and bacteria we women produce in our little kitchen fermenters. It scares men, you know. Best thing about it, really. Tell them tailored bacteria and they come up with stories of dead bodies with nervous systems full of living microbes lurching down from the high burials to find the doors they were carried out of." She shook her head in rueful amusement. "So they build special doors for corpses while we tighten the knots in the Web."

"The Web?" Tessa found the catechism annoying.

"The Web that keeps us from falling into the crevasses right under life on Koola. It's supported us since time im-mem-morial." Dalka lingered over the word as if it was a particularly delicious chocolate. She waved her arms, fat jiggling. "Take these dilberries, for example."

Tessa looked up at the purple, oil-containing fruit dangling just above them.

"If these trees were left alone," Dalka said, "they'd die out. Nothing fertilizes them naturally. But they're held by the Web. Men distract little wasps into them by hanging tangleflowers all over the trees. A paltry male secret. Did you ever look at those flowers and wonder why they were there?"

"I did, but—"

"But you thought it was all for love!" Dalka barked a laugh. "Well, we'll see next spring, won't we? Then I bet you won't be sorry to be back from school."

Tessa saw no need to respond to the sally. Lush tangleflower blossoms cascading from the branches, their intoxicating scent filling the dilberry

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groves, were a symbol of romance. It was a commonplace that a girl, having made love to her first boy under the trees, returned home with her loose hair full of tangleflower petals.

"Who invented it all, Dalka?" Tessa kept her thoughts on the matter at hand.

Dalka slowed for the first time. "It's been done since time im-mem—"

"You said that." Tessa's lessons at Hammerswick came to her rescue. "But the ancestors of dilberries are native to Koola, while the wasps are gene-modified and come from Tal-Tal-Monga, famous for its biological products. And the tangleflowers—no one knows. So who put them all together?"

"That's the magic of the Web." Dalka retreated into obscurity. "And Sora wished you to learn its secrets."

"Yes, Dalka."

Tessa started the next morning by hanging vegetables up to dry. The long, dark-blue roots would, in a few weeks, taste like thick, greasy meat. No one in the upper Shield valleys favored the taste, but city dwellers on the edge of the Great Flats enjoyed it, for some reason. They were stupid enough to live down there in the thick air and so could not be expected to have sense about other things.

With mindless meticulousness, she quartered the arm-long tubers and strung them on the rack. She would take a stroll about the kitchen garden whenever her arms got tired and look off across the farms to the other wall of the canyon. At that moment farming seemed so painful that it had obviously been ordained by God as punishment for unknown sins.

She'd brought books back from Hammerswick but had progressed little in reading them. There was always some task to interrupt her, whether it was Benjamin's hand, cut on a trellis, or the filth that accumulated in the house as if delivered daily by some unusually dutiful service, or simply the countless varieties of plant that grew in the canyon to be harvested every month. She had been able to spend very little time with the upstairs fossil collection, its complex Koolan taxonomies worked out in Sora's careful hand, and longed to find out more about this, her mother's private fascination. There were times now when she saw the farms and fields of Calrick Bend for what they were: a microscopically thin overlay of human action over an alien and enigmatic planet. That did not make the tubers any lighter.

After one turn about the garden she found Benjamin himself. He sat on the side stairs by the drying rack, paying diligent attention to the tension swivels on his dart rifle. He'd pulled the webbing off and was deliberately tightening it, strand by strand.

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She sat down next to him. "Going hunting, Benjamin?"

"Yeah." He didn't look at her but bent his head to his task. "It's something that's got to be done."

Tessa looked at her younger brother's curly haired head. What made men so certain about things that were only guesses, presumptions, and dreams? "There's plenty that has to be done here."

He finally looked up at her, his dark eyes appraising. "I *know* that. One thing is that I'm going to get that wapiti. The one, you remember, at Momma's burial. That's number one. Then me and Dom can get this family working again."

Tessa fought down the anger that came at this childish arrogance. "How is killing the wapiti going to help?"

"I've been in the high valleys. It's still up there. Something's brought it down from the Boss. But I can find it. And kill it."

"That's good, Benjamin. But right now you can come and help me finish hanging these vegetables."

He looked disgusted. "Come on. That's your job. I have more important things to do."

"Like hunting wapiti."

"Like hunting wapiti." His voice rose. "Like seeing that this family doesn't just disappear."

"We won't disappear. But it takes work. We all have to work."

"Don't talk to me like that!" Benjamin was near tears. "You're not Momma. You can't tell me what to do. You can't run this family—"

Tessa felt her temper starting to fray. "I'm not trying to run this family."

"Dom. Dom and I can run this family. We know what to do. We don't need you messing into it."

This was too much. Before he could react, Tessa darted forward, seized him with a strength she hadn't known she had, and hung him up by his belt on the drying rack. He yelped. She looked at him in satisfaction. "You can just hang up there with the rest of the vegetables until you dry out."

Completely forgetting his manly demeanor, Benjamin broke into tears. He wailed and kicked his legs.

"What the hell is this?" Dom strode past Tessa and regarded his brother. Benjamin choked down his sobs. Dom shook his head and pulled him off. Not looking at either of his siblings, Benjamin ran into the house, head down.

"You forgot your dart rifle!" Tessa shouted after him.

Dom bent over and picked it up. He looked at her. Annoyance and amusement vied for control of his face. "Now, Tessa, what did you have to go and do that for? Things are tough enough for him. His pride—"

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"*His* pride?" Tessa was outraged. "What about mine?"

"He's only thirteen."

"Time for him to start learning about what's important." They stared at each other. "Any other objections?"

"No. There's too much to get done." He walked slowly away, dart rifle under his arm.

Kevin ran out of the house. "Ben's crying!" His earnest face demanded more information.

"Yes, Kevin. He's very upset."

This seemed sufficient explanation. Kevin reached into the bin and wrestled out a tuber as long as he was. "Can I help?" It slithered in his arms as if alive. He stumbled around trying to subdue it, his face a mask of grim resolve. Tessa turned away, using every ounce of determination to keep from laughing. Pride was nothing to be trifled with.

"We all climb up here," Dalka said, breath wheezing dangerously as she labored up the trail. "But each of us seeks something different." She pulled herself up onto a rock ledge, grunting. Below her was a hundred meter drop. She sat down to dangle her feet over the edge and pulled out her pipe. On a planet with higher gravity she would have been confined; on Koola she was free.

"Men hunt," Tessa said, sitting down next to her.

"They do. To no good purpose, in protein/energy balance terms." Dalka puffed the pipe to light. "The time would be more usefully spent planting another crop."

"I don't think they see it in protein/energy balance terms."

"That's why they need us, dear." Above their ledge was a slope made up of large toppled rock slabs. Dalka gestured at it. "We come up here for necessaries, not silly animals. The air's right up here for the proper lichens. They should be on the shaded sides of those rocks."

The air was thin and cold, shrugging off any influence of human beings. It was a high Shield air, dry and unforgiving. Tessa took the dry feeling in her nostrils as a benison. They had been climbing all morning, floating up the tilted cliff side, to this specific hanging alcove, a special place of Dalka's. The lush bottom of Cooperset Canyon was now invisible behind cliffs and towers of rock.

Tessa climbed partway up the rock fall and searched shadowed cracks for the particular silver-blue lichen Dalka wanted. Its paracrinelike secretions were specific and rare, essential to Dalka's enzyme operations. Was this really how she wanted to spend her rare days free of farm work? Tessa sighed, carefully inaudible.

"We do have to watch out for them, of course." Dalka's tenor voice carried easily on the breeze. "They know these high valleys, of course,

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as well as we do. Better, maybe, because they run around so much, chasing their beasts." She made the admission grudgingly. "But they still get lost and, since they're convinced that they *don't* get lost, they're hard to find. You'll find an occasional dried-up body in a crevasse—the bad end of an unsuccessful hunting trip. No telling how old they are."

Tessa paused and peered down into the shadows. Was that a bony hand stretching out toward the sunlight from beneath the rock? No, no, it was just a couple of dried twigs. She squinted at it one last time and went back to work. A patch of the necessary lichen covered the top lip of a particularly precarious rock.

"So how do you watch out for them?" she asked, after a moment. Dalka did not reply immediately, but sent up an exceptionally large puff of smoke, as if to remind Tessa where she was.

Tessa chimneyed up to the lichen and hung there as she scraped at it. It smelled bitter and dusty. From her precarious perch she could see the shattered teeth of Ariel's, Fulda's, Top Hat, and Angel's Buttes, blue with distance. To the right, visible only as a succession of ever-hazier ranges, was the height of the Boss, the Plateau hidden behind it. A sand hawk flew overhead, catching a thermal from the open area at the base of Caspar's Lith. Tessa paused in her work, feeling the glory of the heights. There was nothing she liked better than walking the high cliffs, when she had a chance. Dalka did too, puffing and wheezing her way formidably up the slopes, so they made natural companions.

"A number of ways," Dalka said finally. Another pause. "Most they don't know about."

"Oh, Dalka," Tessa said, exasperated. "I'm not going to tell."

"I'm sure you won't, dear. Even under the soft blossoms of the tangleflowers."

"When the time for that comes, I'm sure I'll have other things to talk about."

Dalka laughed explosively. "Fair enough, child. And secrets cease to be anything if no one knows them. Well . . . my favorite is a simple one. Do you clean your brothers' boots?"

"Only Kevin's. He's young and they're really tiny, so it's fun. The others stay dirty."

"Give it a try. Just a bit of extra work, nothing for a woman. There's a leather polish, an emollient and binder complex, that works well. As a side effect, the boots then leave traces on the rocks. A few simple enzyme reactions and you can track any given pair of boots, if you have a sensitive nose." She chortled. "And the men think you're doing it so their feet will be clean-shod."

Tessa smiled despite herself. She was starting to think that she might

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enjoy being as sly as Dalka. She thought about her brothers, and the wapiti, and their male secrets. "Can you show me?"

Dalka smoked thoughtfully while Tessa finished collecting the lichen. "Certainly. It's a set of reactions useful for other purposes as well, so we aren't even being frivolous."

They cooked dinner over a portable heater and rolled out their sleeping bags right near the cliff's edge. Mountains disappeared one by one into the darkness. The rasp of the wind's cold grew sharper.

"Dalka," Tessa said as she lay in her bag staring up at the star-filled sky. "What was my mother looking for?"

"You mean, with all those ancient bugs of hers? Ancestors, I think."

"Ancestors?"

"Of course. We all need them. Look at these wards families spend so much time on. They seek roots to support their branches. Sora just decided that her roots lay here, on Koola, and not anywhere else in the universe. She spent her time trying to understand those roots. It made no sense to me, mind, but that was her business."

"I was born on Koola," Tessa said.

"That you were, child. Go to sleep."

Before Tessa knew it, it was morning, and time to climb back down into the canyon to resume her labors.

Tessa awoke in darkness. She didn't move or thrash around but tried to figure out why she was awake. She lay in her own bed in her own room, and a trace of moonlight came through the window. A shadowy figure loomed.

"Tessa!" Dom hissed. "Wake up."

"I'm awake. Why?"

"It's that idiot, Benjamin. He's gone off."

"Get clear, Dom."

"He thinks he's found the trail of that damn wapiti." Dom was disgusted. "He's been fascinated by it since Momma's funeral."

"I know. He's not been too clear on why."

"He wants to kill it. It will redeem our family."

"Doesn't he knew that doesn't make any sense?" Tessa said.

"Never mind that! We have to get him. Now. This is a goddam embarrassment."

Tessa got out of bed and dressed herself. After a moment's hesitation she grabbed her small bag of chemicals and reagents, wondering if, in future years, it would grow to the size of Dalka's. Perin was still asleep but an excited Kevin waited for them below. "Where are you going?" he cried.

"Shh, Kevin," Tessa said. "You'll wake Poppa."

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"Where are you going?" His voice was the barest whisper, carefully enunciated.

"Benjamin—gotten lost—night—we have to find him—you take care of Poppa." Dom and Tessa interrupted each other in their whispered description.

Kevin listened gravely, then lifted his arm in a farewell salute. "Good luck. Should I make pancakes for when you get back?"

"No," Tessa said. "You'll just make a mess."

Kevin pouted. "You never give me any credit." He sat down on the floor and started playing with the blocks Perin had made for him. There wasn't time to convince him to go back to bed.

"His usual hunting trek is up Pong's Defile, over Torfoot Jumble, and up into Born or Oak," Dom puffed over his shoulder as they ran. "The only thing we can do is start there." Both Koola's moons had risen and gave a clear light.

"Good luck that the moons are out," Tessa said as they clambered over the rocks of Torfoot Jumble.

"If you think about it, little sister, you'll realize that that's the reason he chose tonight to go wapiti hunting."

"Oh."

Dom slowed, and stopped at the splitting point of Born and Oak canyons. There was no sign of which way Benjamin had gone, if he had indeed come this way at all. Dom sighed and was clearly about to pick a direction at random. Her brother was a careful man, Tessa knew, and that necessity must have been driving him crazy.

Tessa shifted her weight uncomfortably. "Can you wait a minute? I'll be right back."

"Sure." Dom sat down on a rock and stared morosely at the forking canyons ahead.

Tessa wandered off among the rocks as if finicky about where she was going to relieve herself. There were three or four easy ways up to the two canyons, and Benjamin would certainly have taken the route of least resistance. His boots, cleaned and oiled diligently by Tessa to Dalka's instructions, would have left distinct traces on the rocks.

So Tessa walked, stumbling over unseen obstructions, and searched out the trails that had led up this way since—she grimaced—time immemorial. At every likely spot she sprayed a bit of the enzyme complex Dalka had given her. On her sixth try she smelled the sharp stink of the reaction. Benjamin had gone up Born Canyon.

But there was no visible trace of Benjamin's passing. She wasn't about to explain the whole enzyme business to Dom, so she needed a better reason for deciding that this was the right direction. A few minutes of

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search up and down the trail rewarded her: just the trace of Benjamin's boot tread in a patch of sand.

"Dom!" she shouted. "Here!"

He appeared in moments and stared down at the almost imperceptible boot print. "Good job, Tessa," he said, finally. He scanned his eyes slowly up the trail, and pointed out something Tessa had not seen, a twig broken by Benjamin's climb over a rock fall. "Let's go."

"It was a lucky find," Tessa said. "I was just—"

"I said good job and I meant it. Don't waste energy worrying about *my* pride. Let's go."

Tessa followed, slightly ashamed of herself.

They crossed a spur and Tessa saw a glow in the distance. Dawn? No—it was early for that yet. The light source rose out of the rocks, far away, visible through a crack in the canyon wall beyond. Suddenly, she realized what it was: the lights of Perala. Where the Hammerswick Academy still was, most of its students virtuously asleep except for those who were even more virtuously up studying. She remembered her time there, an interval of civilization in her life. Now she was climbing through the dark mountains with one crazy intent brother in pursuit of a second. Perala looked so close, as if she could reach out, grab the top of Rock Bastion, which guarded its upstream approach, and pull herself there to drop into her old bed in the dorm.

Dom was already far ahead of her. She hurried in pursuit.

Dawn seemed to grow out of the earth itself, slowly defining the bulk of rocks in shades of dark blue. Dom and Tessa found themselves moving more quickly and surely before they realized why. Dom's quick hunter's eye had found several more traces of Benjamin's passing.

The box canyon they climbed narrowed to a crack and grew steeper. A cold wind blew through it from somewhere high above. Tessa fancied she could smell the fresh grasses of the Plateau. Perhaps they would find the high plainsmen if they kept climbing.

"He's a young idiot." Dom had been improvising variations on this theme since they started. "No one should be this high alone." They clambered out of the crack and over a crumbling ridge. A narrow canyon lay ahead of them. Dom pointed. "There."

Benjamin was a tiny dot on the opposite slope, moving slowly, like someone tired and unsure of what he was doing. He disappeared over the top and they slid down the talus to the bottom of the canyon, sight of their quarry giving their legs new strength.

When they reached the top of the next ridge, Benjamin turned and saw them standing high above him. He stopped dead for a moment, as if not believing they were there, then started to run.

"An especial kind of idiot. He's going to hurt himself."

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Dom had barely spoken before a rock turned under Benjamin's foot and he vanished from their view. He didn't make a sound.

"Damn it!" Dom pointed to the right. "You go this way. I'll slide this way. Damn him for a fool."

Tessa reached Benjamin first. His arm was broken, his face covered with agonized sweat, but he still struggled up the next slope, whining like an injured animal. He wailed and tried desperately to bring his dart rifle to bear on something ahead of him.

Tessa looked up. Looming over them, as it had at Momma's funeral, was a Great Wapiti. It stared down at them, curved horns sharp against the cloudless sky.

Benjamin whimpered and lowered his weapon. He could not fire it with only one arm. The wapiti waited majestically for a moment, as if to see the outcome of Benjamin's struggle, then bounded over a rock and was gone.

"Damn you! Damn you!" Benjamin sobbed in great heaves. "It's all your fault. You lost him for me. If it wasn't for you . . . oh, damn you!"

"Benjamin—we were just trying to find you. It's all right. It's all right. Let's take care of this arm."

He shoved her away with his good arm, refusing to be comforted, and sobbed all the louder. It was finally too much for her.

"Oh, for God's sake, Ben, stop being such a big baby. You're being absolutely ridiculous."

Dom slid down the slope. Saying nothing, he matter-of-factly took care of Benjamin's arm with an inflatable splint from his emergency kit. He sat his brother up against a rock and looked at him. Benjamin looked back, trying to control his tears.

"Don't worry, Ben." Dom's voice was soothing. "It's not a failure because you tried as hard as you could. It's almost impossible to track a wapiti. It's amazing you did what you did."

Benjamin's face was transformed with pride. He looked challengingly at Tessa, closing ranks with his brother against the female interloper. Tessa felt rage, and disappointment. After that long, companionable climb up the canyons, Dom had turned against her, as she had all along feared he would.

"But that was no excuse for acting like a self-important idiot," Dom continued, not raising his voice. "To go off without warning in the middle of the night . . . Tessa and I had to track you all the way up here. It was a self-centered, stupid, arrogant, inconsiderate thing to do, and if you ever try it again I'll use you to fertilize the melon vines."

Benjamin's face went slack at this transformation of his brother from ally to scold. Tessa stepped away to give them privacy while Dom chewed Benjamin out and to keep herself from putting in her bit, which she

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desperately wanted to do. That would be too much. Pride, after all, was at stake.

Then she saw it. Projecting from the rubble at the cliff's base was the snout of a huge fossil trilobite. It gleamed in the sun, for it seemed to be made entirely of iron pyrite.

"Dom!" she said, feeling an excitement she could not entirely explain. "Come here and look."

Dom looked and, without further bidding, began to dig the rubble away from it so that they could see it better. She joined him. As they dug the sun rose and filled the high canyon. After a while, lacking any more productive activity, Benjamin came and lent the assistance of his one good arm.

The fossil had been freed from its matrix by a recent rock slide. The rubble covering it was loose. In an hour the entire thing was revealed, glittering like a spacecraft from another star. It was a perfectly preserved specimen, almost as large as the ones guarding the approach to Topfield.

Dom touched it, feeling the precise lines of its carapace. "That was pretty silly." His forehead was beaded with sweat. "Am I helping you continue Momma's fossil collection? What are we supposed to do with it now?"

"We carry it down." Tessa was calmly certain.

Dom laughed. "Are you out of your mind, dear little sister? This thing must weigh half a ton. Look at the size of it."

Tessa did and finally saw it, not as a mystic symbol, her link to her mother and, through her mother, to the planet itself, but as a giant hunk of iron ore. She let out a sigh. Bringing it home would have been just the right closure for Sora's departure from their family, something brought back from the heights just as Momma had been carried up and left. It would have made things seem to make sense. She felt bitter disappointment.

Benjamin plucked at its edge. "It seems to be loose here."

"You're delirious," Dom said. "It's the pain killers. Let's stop wasting our time and head home. There's work to do."

"Dom, will you look at it?" Benjamin was exasperated. "Just for a second."

Dom did so. He frowned, then put both hands under the edge and heaved. The muscles stood out in his arms and back and the shell pulled up, so easily that he almost stumbled back. The pyrite carapace was hollow. He peered underneath, as if fearing something concealed. "How did this happen?"

Tessa sat down, feeling lightheaded. "I bet that after this trilobite died, scavengers ate out the innards. Only the hard shell was left to be replaced

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by the pyrite inclusion. It's like a giant's shield. Can we try to pick it up?"

The three of them hefted it. There were enough spikes and protrusions that it was easy to hold on to. It was still heavy, but perfectly possible to carry. She looked at her brothers. "Will you help me?"

"Yes," Benjamin said, eager to make peace.

"Come on," Dom said. "We won't be able to carry it down at once. Don't you remember how long it took to get up here?"

"This can be a project," Tessa said. "If it takes a year, we can finish it."

"Try two years," Dom said.

He was closer to being right.

When they returned home that day, the sun already setting, Perin was desperately worried, having been unable to understand Kevin's garbled explanations. Kevin had dedicated himself, meticulously and with great concentration, to setting things up for pancakes. They all sat down to eat them, though it was time for dinner. "There's a real art to pancakes," Kevin pronounced, burning every one.

After dinner, Tessa went upstairs and closed herself into Sora's study. Racks of fossils from all of Koola's geologic eras stood around her. Sora's paleontological notebook still lay open to the last entry, a comparison of two amphibian skeletons from different periods.

The golden trilobite, of course, would never fit in here, and that was not what she intended. She wanted it as the base of the Wolholme family ward. If other families thought they grew out of a distant, mythical blue-green world, that was fine for them. The Wolholmes, as Sora had long ago realized, were creatures of Koola. It was right that they should show it. If Tessa mentioned it now, the rest of the family would hoot at her, and refuse to help. By the time they dragged the thing, inch by sweaty inch, down to Calrick Bend, she thought they would feel differently.

Tessa lay down on the floor, her head on a chunk of rock dense with ancient ferns, and went to sleep. ●

(From page 175)

"Alfred"; popular new writer **Mary Rosenblum** investigates an ancient Enigma lost among the polar snows, in the compelling story of how sometimes life gives you a "Second Chance"; **M. Shayne Bell** takes us to a troubled future Africa for a vivid object lesson in what happens to those who get too far away from "The Sound of the River"; and new writer **Mark W. Tiedemann** paints a fascinating picture of a relationship that goes on *long* after Till Death Do You Part, in "Thanatrope." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 13, 1992.

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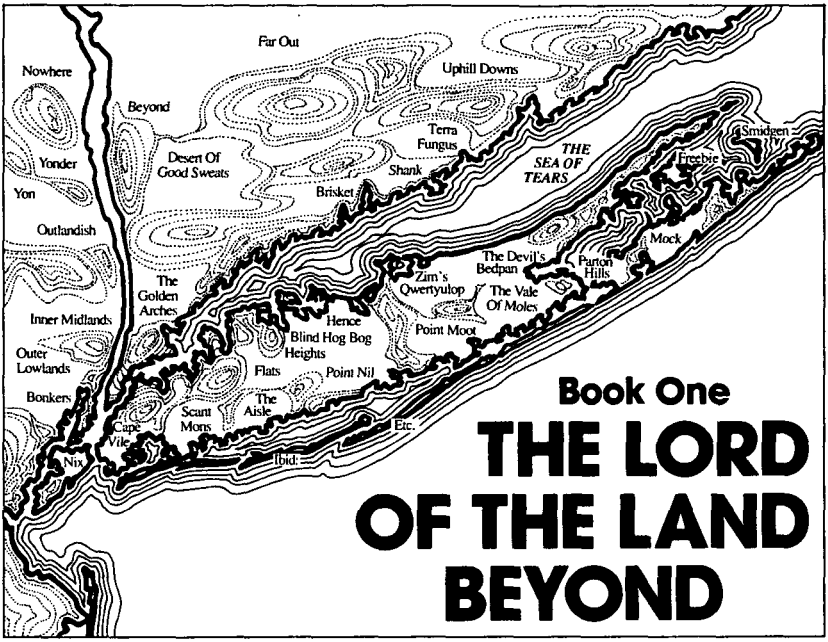

Larry Tritten

The author's amusing spoof, "The Lord of the Land Beyond (Book One)," is his first tale for *Asimov's* since June 1980. Mr. Tritten's credits include *The New Yorker, Playboy, Vanity Fair, Cosmopolitan, F&SF,* and *Amazing Stories.*

art: Sallie Gregory

Hundreds of years ago, or perhaps thousands—no one really knew—it had been a land of Silk and Money, a place where mechanical horses with rubber legs carried people for miles without resting and glass birds carried them further still to lands beyond, and every house was lighted with a captured fragment of the sun, and there were erotic pictures that had been painted by the acolytes of the god Kodak on walls everywhere, and the markets were stocked with trance-inducing drugs and remedies that were sprayed from cans, and men in fur suits hawked contracts that could be exchanged for cash on the date of a stipulated loved one's death.

So much the English Scrawls said. So much, it was assumed, was true.

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But few people knew where the truth could be found now. Few men could read or write. There were fragments of the Old Literature in the hands of a few scholars and wizards, men like Glossary, Helix, Talkshow, Sony, Warner, and Paramount; but there had been no New Literature for at least a decadeum. Life was drab and dutiful for all, predictable, and to be sure, undistinguished by any merriment more spectacular than an occasional impromptu dance or a rowdy tumble down a hill after a leather of black drizzle wine.

In the Parton Hills, beyond the uplands, near the edge of the nether sedge, in the land of the Seven Hummocks, an arrow's flight from the Sunken Dingle, lived a youth called Bravo, the first and only son of the plumvendor Muddle. Long since had Muddle's wife, Giddy, been killed by an overdose of the color purple, and now Muddle and Bravo lived alone, Muddle harvesting sloes by day while the lad gathered bits of lint into a great ball and fished with an ax, or tried to sell packets of extra breath to road-weary travelers. All of the youth of Semblance were restless, especially before Grabbing a Mate, but Bravo seemed especially so. He was a dreamer.

II

Dreams were rare in Semblance; toil was all. For this reason, Bravo woke early one morning, beating even the sun up from its rumpled bed of cloud and mist, and, in the darkness, packed a bag for traveling: a single change of cloak, tunic, twilled pantaloons, and deerskin underlinen; a cannikan of gizzards, half a dozen rusks, and a flask of plum ale; and a pair of spiked knuckles and kicking shoes to discourage layabouts.

Long ago, in his early youth, Bravo's uncle (or had it been his aunt?—they wore each other's clothing) had filled his mind with tales of a land beyond, nay *beyond* beyond, even beyond yonder, and far past hither in the regions of yon, where once a grand city of jewels and gold and glass and candy had been, and where even now (so it was told) a Future waited for one with the courage and endurance to seek and find it.

Since Bravo could remember, no one had ever left these parts. His people, louts in the aggregate, cared little of what might be obtained beyond the soot and cobalt darks of the outlands. This much he knew: he was different. There was wanderlust in his blood. Besides, a girl who lived in the Vale of Moles, and was not clearly distinguishable from a water beast, had twice left cake on his sill, and was, he was sure, intent on snaring him with a swivel and gaff at the next Meeting of the Mates.

Bravo struck out as the rays of the morning sun dissolved the shades

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of eve and scatterwags sang in clumps of violet fern. South past Point Moot and Point Nil he headed, whistling as he walked, then took the Aisle past Mons and into a forest of gaunt bonewood trees, pausing there to rest. As the inks of night colored the sky, he came to Scant, where he sought lodging at the Outside Inn (so called because the landlord could afford neither a fourth wall nor a roof).

Over a plate of green sock and pizza leavings, he noticed the other diner in the inn, a woebegone fellow in a tattered brown suit and ratskin sandals, who was nursing a leather of ill chill.

"Ho, come share a leather of chill!" the traveler called to Bravo, seeing that he was being watched. He thumped the table with a sturdy hand, turning to the landlord to call, "Two bags o' dark for the youth and I, and do the quick step, man," then fired a glance like a vollied ember toward Bravo. "Join me, lad!"

Bravo, while reminding himself that caution and courtesy should weigh in equal balance when meeting strangers, accepted the invitation. He took up a place facing the man, and introduced himself. The landlord brought them each a pouch of three-knocks chill, took an ebony disc tossed in the air, and went back to the kitchen to fuss at his wife and hound.

"Travelin', lad?" asked the hard case, squinting over his pouch. Bravo saw that he had a face that looked as if it had been carved out of sour amber wood by an artificer with an eye for neither beauty nor detail.

"So," said Bravo, and sipped from his leather.

A thing once told to Bravo by his father came into application now: never speak until you've listened—unless your coffers are full and your fowl fed. Reflecting that, on second thought, he doubted that he knew the *meaning* of the adage, he elected to listen.

The traveler, according to the tale he told, had been the valet of a magician with whom he had toured the realms beyond The Devil's Bedpan: they had gone about changing minds for a small fee; wherever they found doubt—in a maiden without courage to choose her suitor, a speculator without solid conviction—they would provide assertion by striking the subject's occiput with a slat, dressing him in a bunny suit, and giving him an arcane rune to cherish. But somewhere something had gone awry. The valet had set out brown shoes for the magician to wear with a blue cloak, bush hogs had set upon them both, and thieves had taken their biscuits. The valet had been banished from the magician's employ with the promise that he would never again be able to discern silver from gold, blonde from brunette, or rain from shine.

"And so I travel alone," concluded the valet, whose name was Yclept.

Bravo inquired, "Whither?"

"Hither," replied Yclept. "And I've a yen to wander yonder, except . . ."

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his voice hesitated. ". . . except this *curse*. . . . Yesterday, in a bawd house, I paid a golden minim for a tryst with a dark-haired maid, though the price was a silver minim and I prefer women with hair as bright as mid-morn moonshine. Then I walked for hours in downpour, supposing the weather to be fair." He shrugged and addressed his chill, "What I need is a traveling mate."

Bravo had an idea. He, an unseasoned traveler, bound for beyond, could profit by the company of one who knew the ways of the road. He suggested as much.

Pulling his lip, Yclept considered the offer, then smiled, clapped Bravo on the shoulder, and sealed their bond with another round of chill, which sped them both into the arms of the ancient sleep god of Valium.

III

On the morrow, as the rising sun mottled the horizon with glints of apricot and indigo light, Bravo and Yclept rose, dined on cold flip and snipewing, and set out.

Departing the inn, they crossed the nearby Flats and rose into the adjacent Heights, descending at mid-day into the marshes of Blind Hog Bog, and from thence passed through the village of Hence (an uncommon place where all and sundry walked with a twitch and fluctuated their forefingers upon their lips, making a sound something like, "Blib-blib-bleeble-blib—beeble . . .)." From Hence they went hence, and from thence into regions beyond Bravo's knowledge. They paid a sullen sculler to ferry them across a channel on a raft. They crossed a swaying rope-bridge over a gorge filled with rushing water and picnicking trolls who fired overripe berries at them from slingshots. They traversed a brief thick forest in which transient incorporeal iridescences flickered and basked on breezes all about them. "The ghosts of colors abused," explained Yclept, and they hurried on.

Sunset brought darkness as dense as licorice, and they built a fire before which, after a meal of berries and onions, Yclept took out a flute and played a very ancient song called "You Deserve a Break Today." Then they fell into a depth of conversation.

Thus began Bravo's education. In the days that followed, as they made their way through bog and fen and glen, dale and vale, over crag and through wood and thicket and across meadow and prairie, Yclept imparted a hundred strange and complex notions to the lad, and filled his mind with useful lore. He taught him how to distill gin from the roots of the Boord's plant, how to track birds by reading the air, how to iron a shirt with a hot rock, and how to make stucco (though Bravo could see

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no clear use for the latter). He taught him how to make an extra coin in a strange village (by sidling up to a stranger and in a tragic tone, whispering, "Got any spare change?") and how to barter with a one-eyed merchant (stand off to one side, at an angle). He told him of a concept so strange (and swore him to secrecy) that only wizards were said to know it: that all things in the world, even wisps and dust, were made of tiny invisible units smaller than grains of sand that could, with the proper magic, be made into explosives powerful enough to deafen the owls in the next county.

On the ninth day of their travel, in a land unknown to either, Bravo and Yclept entered a village of straw huts and amicable seeming folk.

Of a passerby, Yclept inquired where they might return two empty bottles they had found for deposit.

"345 56789 11/24 234," answered the fellow.

"I'm afraid– uh . . ." Yclept began.

"437," nodded the fellow, and went his way.

Hearing laughter, they turned to see a young woman of marvelous beauty observing them. Her hair was pale as ale, her skin as tan as flan; her smile a sunrise in her face.

"34 458 762," she said to Bravo, shyly.

Yclept pulled at his nose. "I begin to understand," he said. "These folk have foregone words and substituted a numerical symbology as a means of communication. Perhaps I can use sign language to inquire about an inn where we might find accommodations for two. . . ."

As the young woman heard Yclept's last words, 4 2, a deep blush colored her features, and a man passing by, overhearing as much, turned suddenly to glare in indignation at Yclept. All in a rush then, two ominous men in black vestments appeared to seize Yclept, and he was dragged quickly from the scene. In short order, and before Bravo could even voice protest, a youth returned with what was left of Yclept in a small tin; a bit of gel and some bone fragments. Taking the tin, Bravo left the village in a hurry, followed by the young woman, who had to dodge thrown compost each step of the way.

IV

At first troubled to be traveling with a young woman his own age, and timid in relating to her, Bravo soon discovered the advantages of the situation when she lured him into an apple tree to pick fruit and asked him instead to guess her sizes.

Before their second day together, Bravo and Brynmawr had learned

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the rudiments of each other's languages, and she was asking him to get a job.

During the following days, Bravo and Brynmawr traveled north by northwest to a land beyond the blue horizon, passing finally one morning beneath the great arch of a rainbow over which bluebirds flew. Exhausted from the intrigues and adventures of their trek, they rested atop a hill, with miles of green orchards in sight, and it was here that Bravo took out the tiny jar of finder's light Yclept had given him one eve with the specific caution not to open it until the end of the road had been reached. He opened the jar, shook out the light, then tugged Brynmawr along to follow the lucid golden essence, flickering like a firefly as it led them across a meadow to a tumbled pile of stones, then faded into naught.

Bravo paced around the stones till he saw the X graven in the earth with what seemed to be veins of pure gold. Holding Brynmawr's hand tightly, he placed his foot squarely upon the X. This was the key to the Vortex, and no sooner had he applied the pressure of his weight than he felt himself turned and whirled, spinning round and round, days and hours and minutes and centuries whirling round him in the cold dark spiraling, and when he came to a stop, his phone was ringing. He opened his eyes to the sight of his desk, covered with important papers that demanded his attention (more overtime): accounts that had to be double-checked, letters that needed answering. Deadlines. He felt a twinge from his ulcer. Beside the picture of his smiling wife, their three children, and their schnauzer, posed in front of his Levittown duplex, the desk calendar read April 13. He hadn't done his taxes yet. His ulcer complained again. The payment for the Rabbit was also overdue. Remembering that, he could not remember from how far beyond he'd come to this desk, to this time, to this place. But what did it matter? Was it bourbon or Scotch they were out of at home?

This concludes *The Lord of the Land Beyond* (Book One). Keep your eye on the bookseller's shelves for Book Two, *The Green Trek*, in which Bravo and Brynmawr set out on further adventures in a quest for an ever-greater advance, residuals, and foreign sales, and hopefully a movie deal. . . . ●

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OUTNUMBERING THE DEAD

Frederik Pohl

Frederik Pohl's brilliant new novella helps make this special issue very special indeed. Mr. Pohl's most recent projects include *Gateway*—a computer game from Legend that is based on his Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning Heechee series. His latest novel, *Mining the Oort*, was published by Ballantine last summer, and the paperback edition of the collaborative nonfiction book, *Our Angry Earth*, that he wrote with Isaac Asimov is forthcoming from Tor.

art: Gary Freeman

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1

Although the place is a hospital, or as much like a hospital as makes no difference, it doesn't smell like one. It certainly doesn't look like one. With the flowering vines climbing its walls and the soothing, gentle plink-tink *of the tiny waterfall at the head of the bed, it looks more like the de luxe suite in some old no-tell motel. Rafiel is now spruced up, replumbed and ready to go for another five years before he needs to come back to this place for more of the same, and so he doesn't look much like a hospital patient, either. He looks like a movie star, which he more or less is, who is maybe forty years old and has kept himself fit enough to pass for twenty-something. That part's wrong, though. After all the snipping and reaming and implanting they've done to him in the last eleven days, what he is is a* remarkably *fit man of ninety-two.*

When Rafiel began to wake from his designer dream he was very hungry (that was due to the eleven days he had been on intravenous feeding) and quite horny, too (that was the last of the designer dream). *"B'jour,* Rafiel," said the soft, sweet voice of the nurser, intruding on his therapeutic dream as the last of it melted away. Rafiel felt the nurser's gentle touch removing the electrodes from his cheekbones, and, knowing very well just where he was and what he had been doing there, he opened his eyes.

He sat up in the bed, pushing away the nurser's velvety helping hand. While he was unconscious they had filled his room with flowers. There were great blankets of roses along one wall, bright red and yellow poppies on the windowsill that looked out on the deep interior court. *"Momento,* please," he said to the nurser, and experimentally stretched his naked body. They had done a good job. That annoying little pain in the shoulder was gone and, when he held one hand before him, he saw that so were the age spots on his skin. He was also pleased to find that he had awakened with a perfectly immense erection. "Seems okay," he said, satisfied.

"Hai, claro," the nurser said. That was the server's programmed all-purpose response to the sorts of sense-free or irrelevant things hospital patients said when they first woke up. "Your *amis* are waiting to come in."

"They can wait." Rafiel yawned, pleasantly remembering the last dream. Then, his tumescence subsiding, he slid his feet over the edge of the bed and stood up. He waved the nurser away and scowled in surprise. "Shit. They didn't fix this little dizziness I've been having."

"*Voulez* see your chart?" the nurser offered. But Rafiel didn't at all want to know what they'd done to him. He took an experimental step or two, and then the nurser would no longer be denied. Firmly it took his arm and helped him toward the sanitary room. It stood by as he used the toilet and joined him watchfully in the spray shower, the moisture rolling harmlessly down its metal flanks. As it dried him off, one of its hands caught his finger and held on for a moment—heartbeat, blood pressure,

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who knew what it was measuring?—before saying, "You may leave whenever you like, Rafiel."

"You're very kind," Rafiel said, because it was his nature to be polite even to machines. To human beings, too, of course. Especially to humans, as far as possible anyway, because humans were what became audiences and no sensible performer wanted to antagonize audiences. But with humans it was harder for Rafiel to be always polite, since his inner feelings, where all the resentments lay, were so frequently urging him to be the opposite—to be rude, insulting, even violent; to spit in some of these handsome young faces sometimes out of the anger that was always burning out of sight inside him. He had every right to that smouldering rage, since he was so terribly cheated in his life, but—he was a fair man—his special problem wasn't really their fault, was it? And besides, the human race in general had one trait that forgave them most others, they adored Rafiel. At least the surveys showed that 36.9 per cent of them probably did, a rating which only a handful of utter superstars could ever hope to beat.

That sort of devotion imposed certain obligations on a performer. Appearance was one, and so Rafiel considered carefully before deciding what to wear for his release from the hospital. From the limited selection his hospital closet offered he chose red pantaloons, a luminous blue blouse and silk cap to cover his unmade hair. On his feet he wore only moleskin slippers, but that was all right. He wouldn't be performing, and needed no more on the warm, soft, mossy flooring of his hospital room.

He time-stepped to the window, glancing out at the distant figures on the galleries of the hundred-meter atrium of the arcology he lived and worked in, and at the bright costumes of those strolling across the airy bridges, before he opaqued the window to study his reflection. That was satisfactory, though it would have been better if he'd had the closets in his condo to choose from. He was ready for the public who would be waiting for him—and for all the other things that would be waiting for him, too. He wondered if the redecoration of his condo had been completed, as it was supposed to have been while he was in the medical facility; he wondered if his agent had succeeded in re-booking the personal appearances he had had to miss, and whether the new show—what was it based on? Yes. *Oedipus Rex*. Whatever that was—had come together.

He was suddenly impatient to get on with his life, so he said, "All right, they can come in now"—and a moment later, when the nurser had signaled the receptionists outside that it was all right, in they all came, his friends and colleagues from the new show: pale, tiny Docilia flying over to him with a quick kiss, Mosay, his dramaturge, bearing still more flowers, a corsage to go on Rafiel's blouse, Victorium with his music box hung around his neck, all grinning and welcoming him back to life. "And *comment va* our Oedipus this morning?" Mosay asked, with pretend solicitude. Mosay didn't mean the solicitude to be taken seriously, of

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course, because there was really nothing for anyone to be solicitous about. The nursers wouldn't have awakened Rafiel if all the work hadn't been successfully done.

"*Tutto bene,*" Rafiel answered as expected, letting Mosay press the bunch of little pink violets to his blouse and smelling their sweet scent appreciatively. "Ready for work. Oh, and having *faim*, too."

"But of course you are, after all *that*," said Docilia, hugging him, "and we have a lunch all set up for you. Can you go now?" she asked him, but looking at the nurser—which answered only by opening the door for them. Warmly clutching his arm and fondly chattering in his ear, Docilia led him out of the room where, for eleven days, he had lain unconscious while the doctors and the servers poked and cut and jabbed and mended him.

Rafiel didn't even look back as he entered this next serial installment of his life. There wasn't any nostalgia in the place for him. He had seen it all too often before.

2

The restaurant—well, call it that; it is like *a restaurant—is located in the midzone of the arcology. There are a hundred or so floors rising above it and a couple of hundred more below. It is a place where famous vid stars go to be seen, and so at the entrance to the restaurant there is a sort of tearoomy, saloony, cocktail-loungy place, inhabited by ordinary people who hope to catch a glimpse of the celebrities who have come there to be glimpsed. As Rafiel and his friends pass through this warm, dim chamber heads gratifyingly turn. Mosay whispers something humorous to Docilia and Docilia, smiling in return, then murmurs something affectionate to Rafiel, but actually all of them are listening more to the people around them than to each other. "It's the short-time vid star," one overheard voice says, and Rafiel can't help glowing a little at the recognition, though he would have preferred, of course, to have been a celebrity only for his work and not for his problem. "I didn't know she was so tiny," says another voice—speaking of Docilia, of course; they often say that. And, though Mosay affects not to hear, when someone says, "He's got a* grandissimo *coming up,* ils disent," *his eyes twinkle a bit, knowing who that "he" is. But then the* maître d' *is coming over to guide them to their private table on an outside balcony.*

Rafiel was the last out the door. He paused to give a general smile and wink to the people inside, then stepped out into the warm, diffused light of the balcony, quite pleased with the way things were going. His friends had chosen the right place for his coming-out meal. If it was important to be seen going to their lunch, it was also important to have their own private balcony set aside to eat it on. They wanted to be seen while eating, of course, because every opportunity to be seen was important to

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theater people—but from a proper distance. Such as on the balcony, where they were in view of all the people who chanced to be crossing the arcology atrium or looking out from the windows on the other side. The value of that was that then those people would say to the next persons they met, "*Senti*, guess who I saw at lunch today! Rafiel! And Docilia! And, *comme dit*, the music person." And their names would be refreshed in the public mind one more time.

So, though this was to be an agendaed lunch, the balcony was the right place to have it. It wasn't a business-looking place; it could have been more appropriate for lovers, with the soft, warm breezes playing on them and hummingbirds hovering by their juice glasses in the hope of a hand-out. Really, it would have been more comfortable for a couple; for the four of them, with their servers moving between them with their buffet trays, it was a pretty tight squeeze.

Rafiel ravened over the food, taking great heaps of everything as fast as the servers could bring it. His friends conspired to help. "Give him *pommes*," Mosay ordered, and Docilia whispered, "Try the *sushi ceveche*, it's *fine*." Mouth full and chewing, Rafiel let his friends fuss over him. From time to time he raised his eyes from his food to smile at jest or light line, but there was no need for him to take part in the talk. He was just out of the hospital, after all. (As well as being a star, even among these stars; but that was a given.) He knew that they would get down to business quickly enough. Docilia was always in a hurry to get on with the next production and Mosay, the dramaturge—was, well, a dramaturge. It was his *business* to get things moving. Meanwhile, it was Rafiel's right to satisfy one appetite and to begin to plan ahead for the pleasing prospect of relieving the other. When Docilia put a morsel of pickled fish between his lips he licked her fingertips affectionately and looked into her eyes.

He was beginning to feel at ease.

The eleven days in the medical facility had passed like a single night for Rafiel, since he had been peacefully unconscious for almost all of it. He saw, though, that time had passed for the others, because they had changed a little. Mosay was wearing a little waxed moustache now and Victorium was unexpectedly deeply tanned, right up to his *cache-sexe* and on the expanse of belly revealed by his short embroidered vest. Docilia had become pale blonde again. For that reason she was dressed all in white, or almost all: white bell-bottomed pants and a white halter top that showed her pale skin. The only touch of contrast was a patch of fuzzy peach-colored embroidery at the crotch of the slacks that, Rafiel was nearly sure he remembered, accurately matched the outlines of her pubic hair. It was a very Docilia kind of touch, Rafiel thought.

Of course, they were all very smartly dressed. They always were; like Rafiel they owed it to their public. The difference between Rafiel and the others was that every one of them looked to be about twenty years old—well, ageless, really, but certainly, at the most, no more than a beautifully fit thirtyish. They always had looked that way. All of them did. All ten *trillion* of them did, all over the world and the other worlds,

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or anyway nearly all . . . Except, of course, for the handful of oddities like himself.

When Docilia saw Rafiel's gaze lingering on her—observing it at once, because Docilia was never unaware when someone was looking at her—she reached over and fondly patted his arm. He leaned to her ear to pop the question: "*Bitte*, are you free this afternoon?"

She gave him a tender smile. "For you," she said, almost sounding as though she meant it, "*siempre*." She picked up his hand and kissed the tip of his middle finger to show she was sincere. "*Mais* can we talk a little business first? Victorium's finished the score, and it's *belle*. We've got—"

"Can we play it over *casa tu*?"

Another melting smile. "*Hai*, we can. *Hai*, we will, as much as you like. But, listen, we've got a wonderful second-act duet, you and I. I love it, Rafiel! It's when you've just found out that the woman you've been shtupping, that's me, is your mother, that's me, too. Then I'm telling you that what you've done is a sin . . . and then at the end of the duet I run off to hang myself. Then you've got a solo dance. Play it for him, Victorium?"

Victorium didn't need to be begged; a touch of his fingers on his amulet recorder and the music began to pour out. Rafiel paused with his spoon in his juicy white sapote fruit to listen, not having much choice. It was a quick, tricky jazz tune coming out of Victorium's box, but with blues notes in it too, and a funny little hoppety-skippy syncopation to the rhythm that sounded Scottish to Rafiel.

"*Che? Che?*" Victorium asked anxiously as he saw the look on Rafiel's face. "Don't you like it?"

Rafiel said, "It's just that it sounds—gammy. *Pas* smooth. Sort of like a little limp in there."

"*Hai! Precisamente!*" cried Mosay. "You caught it at once!"

Rafiel blinked at him. "What did I catch?"

"What Victorium's music conveyed, of course! You're playing Oedipus Rex and he's *supposed* to be lame."

"Oh, *claro*," said Rafiel; but it wasn't really all that clear to him. He wiped the juice of the sapote off his lips while he thought it over. Then he asked the dramaturge, "Do you think it's a good idea for me to be dancing the part of somebody who's lame?" He got the answer when he heard Docilia's tiny giggle, and saw Victorium trying to smother one of his own. "Ah, *merde*," Rafiel grumbled as, once again, he confronted the unwelcome fact that it was not his talent but his oddity that delighted his audiences. Ageing had been slowed down for him, but it hadn't stopped. His reflexes were not those of a twenty-year-old; and it was precisely those amusing little occasional stumbles and slips that made him *Rafiel*. "I don't like it," he complained, knowing that didn't matter.

"But you *must* do it that way," cried the dramaturge, persuasive, forceful—being a dramaturge, in short, with a star to cajole into shape. "*C'est toi*, really! The part could have been made for you. Oedipus has a bit of

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a physical problem, but we see how he rises above his limitations and dances beautifully. As, always, do you yourself, Rafiel!"

"D'accord," Rafiel said, surrendering as he knew he must. He ate the fruit for a moment, thinking. When it was finished he pushed the shell aside and asked sourly, "How lame is this Oedipus supposed to be, exactly?"

"He's a *blessé,* a little bit. He has something wrong with his ankles. They were mutilated when he was a baby."

"Hum," said Rafiel, and gave Victorium a nod. The musician replayed the five bars of music.

"Can you dance to it?" Victorium asked anxiously.

"Of course I can. If I had my tap shoes—"

"Give him his tap shoes, Mosay," Docilia ordered, and then bent to help Rafiel slip them on, while the dramaturge clapped his hands for a server to bring a tap mat.

"Play from the end of the duet," Rafiel ordered, abandoning his meal to stand up in the narrow space of the balcony. He moved slightly, rocking back and forth, then began to tap, not on the beat of the music, but just off it—*step left, shuffle right*—while his friends nodded approvingly—*spank it back, scuff it forward.* But there wasn't really enough room. One foot caught another; he stumbled and almost fell, Victorium's strong hand catching him. "I'm clumsier than ever," he sighed resentfully.

"They'll love it," Mosay said, reassuring him, and not lying, either, Rafiel knew unhappily; for what was it but his occasional misstep, the odd quaver in his voice—to be frank about it, the peculiarly fascinating traits of his advancing age—that made him a superstar?

He finished his meal. "Come on, Docilia. I'm ready to go," he said, and although the others clearly wanted to stay and talk they all agreed that what Rafiel suggested was a good idea. They always did. It was one of the things that made Rafiel's life special—one of the good things. It came with being a superstar. He was used to being indulged by these people, because they needed him more than he needed them, although, as they all knew, they were going to live for ever and he was not.

3

All the worlds know the name of Rafiel, but, actually, "Rafiel" isn't all of his name. That name, in full, is Rafiel Gutmaker-Fensterborn, just as Docilia, in full, is Docilia Megareth–Morb, and Mosay is Mosay Koi Mosayus. But "Rafiel" is all he needs. Basically, that is the way you can tell when you've finally become a major vid star. You no longer need all those names to be identified or even to get your mail delivered. Even among a race of ten trillion separate, living, named human beings, when you have their kind of stardom a single name is quite enough.

* * *

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Rafiel's difficulty at present was that he didn't happen to be in his own condo, where his mail was. Instead he was in Docilia's, located fifty-odd stories above his own in the arcology. He really did want to know what messages were waiting for him.

On the other hand, this particular delay was worthwhile. Although Rafiel had been sleeping for eleven days, his glands had not. He was well charged up for the exertions of Docilia's bed. He came to climax in record time—the first time—with Docilia helpfully speeding him along. The second time was companionably hers. Then they lay pleasantly spooned, with Rafiel drowsily remembering now and then to kiss the back of her neck under the fair hair. It wasn't Alegretta's hair, he thought, though without any real pain (you couldn't actually go on aching all your life for a lost love, though sometimes he thought he was coming close); but it was nice hair, and it was always nice to make love to this tiny, active little body. But after a bit she stretched, yawned and left him, fondly promising to be quickly back, while she went to return calls. He rolled over to gaze at the pleasing sight of her naked and youthfully sweet departing back.

It was a fact, Rafiel knew, that Docilia wasn't youthful in any chronological sense. In terms of life span she was certainly a good deal older than himself, however she looked. But you couldn't ignore the way she looked, either, because the way she looked was what the audiences were going to see. As the story of *Oedipus Rex* began to come back to him, he began to wonder: Would any audience believe for one moment that this girlish woman could be his mother?

It was a silly thought. The audiences weren't going to worry about that sort of thing. If it registered with them at all it would be only another incongruity of the kind that they loved so well. Rafiel dismissed the worry, and then, as he lay there, pleasantly at ease, he at last became aware of the faint whisper of music from Docilia's sound system.

So it had been an agendaed tryst after all, he thought tolerantly. But a sweet one. If she had not forgotten to have Victorium's score playing from the moment they entered her flat, at least she had been quite serious about the lovemaking he had come there for. So Rafiel did what she wanted him to do; he lay there, letting the music tell its story to his ears. It wasn't a bad score at all, he thought critically. He was beginning to catch the rhythms in his throat and feet when Docilia came back.

She was glowing. "Oh Rafiel," she cried, "*look* at this!"

She was waving a tomograph, and when she handed it to him he was astonished to see that it was an image of what looked like a three-month fetus. He blinked at her in surprise. "Yours?"

She nodded ecstatically. "They just sent it from the creche," she explained, nervous with pleasure. "Isn't it *très belle?*"

"Why, that's *molto bene,*" he said warmly. "I didn't know you were *enceinte* at all. Who's the *padre?*"

She shrugged prettily. "Oh, his name is Charlus. I don't think you

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know him, but he's really good, isn't he? I mean, *look* at that gorgeous child."

In Rafiel's opinion, no first-trimester fetus could be called anything like "gorgeous," but he knew what was expected of him and was not willing to dampen her delight. "It's certainly a good-looking embryo, *senza dubito,*" he told her with sincerity.

"His *always* are! He's fathered some of the best children I've ever seen—good-looking, and with his dark blue eyes, and oh, so tall and strong!" She hesitated for a moment, prettily almost blushing. Then, "We're going to share the *bambino* for a year," she confided proudly. "As a family, I mean. When the baby's born Charlus and I are going to start a home together. Don't you think that's a wonderful idea?"

There was only one possible answer to that, "Of course I do," said Rafiel, regardless of whether he did or not.

She gave him a fond pat. "That's what you ought to do too, Rafiel. Have a child with some nice *dama,* bring the baby up together."

"And when would I find time?" he asked. But that wasn't a true answer. The true answer was that, yes, he would have liked nothing better, provided the right woman was willing to donate the ovum . . . but the right woman had, long ago, firmly foreclosed that possibility.

Docilia had said something that he missed. When he asked for a repeat, she said, "I said, and it'll help my performance, won't it?"

He was puzzled. "Help how?"

She said, impatient with his lack of understanding. "Because Jocasta's a *mutter,* don't you see? That's the whole point of the story, isn't it? And now I can get right into the part, because I'm being a *mutter,* too."

Rafiel said sincerely, "You'll be fine." He meant it, too. He had assumed she would all along.

"Yes, *certo,*" she said absently, thinking already of something else. "I think I ought to give a copy to the dad. He'll be so excited."

"*I* would be," Rafiel agreed. She blinked and returned her attention to him. She lifted the sheet and peered under it for a thoughtful moment.

"I think," she said judiciously, "if you're not in a great hurry to leave, if we just give it a few more minutes. . . ."

"No hurry at all," he said, pulling her down to him and stroking her back in a no-hurry-at-all way. "Well," he said. "So what else have you been doing? Did they release your *Inquisitor* yet?"

"Three days ago," she said, rubbing her foot along his ankle. "God, those clothes were so *heavy,* and then the last scene—You didn't see it, of course?"

"How could I?"

"No, of course not. Well, try to, *si c'est* possible, because I'm really fine in the *auto-da-fé* scene."

"What scene?" Rafiel knew that Docilia had finished shooting something about the Spanish Inquisition, with lots of torture—torture stories always went well in this world that had so little personal experience of any kind of suffering, but he hadn't actually seen any part of it.

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"Where they burn me at the stake. *Quelle horreur!* See, they spread the wood all around in a huge circle and light it at the edges, and I'm chained to the stake in the middle. *Che cosa!* I'm running from side to side, trying to get away from the fire as it burns toward me, and then I start burning myself, *capisce?* And then I just fall down on the burning coals."

"It sounds wonderful," Rafiel said, faintly envious. Maybe it was time for him to start looking for dramatic parts instead of all the song and dance?

"*I* was wonderful," she said absently, reaching under the covers to see what was happening. Then she turned her face to his. "And, guess what? You're getting to be kind of wonderful yourself, *galubka,* right now. . . "

Three times was as far as Rafiel really thought he wanted to go. Anyway, Docilia was now in a hurry to send off the picture of her child. "Let yourself out?" she asked, getting up. Then, naked at her bedroom door, she stopped to look back at him.

"We'll all be fine in this *Oedipus,* Rafiel," she assured him. "You and me in the lead parts, and Mosay putting it all together, and that *merveilleux* score." Which was still repeating itself from her sound system, he discovered.

He blew her a kiss, laughing. "I'm listening, I'm listening," he assured her. And did in fact listen for a few moments.

Yes, Rafiel told himself, it really was a good score. *Oedipus* would be a successful production, and when they had rehearsed it and revised it and performed it and recorded it, it would be flashed all over the solar system, over all Earth and the Moon and the capsule colonies on Mars and Triton and half a dozen other moons, and the orbiting habitats wherever they might be, and even to the distant voyagers well on their way to some other star—to all ten million million human beings, or as many of them as cared to watch it. And it would *last!* Recordings of it would survive for centuries, to be taken out and enjoyed by people not yet born, because anything that Rafiel appeared in became an instant classic.

Rafiel got up off Docilia's warm, shuddery bed and stood before her mirror, examining himself. Everything the mirror displayed looked quite all right. The belly was flat, the skin clear, the eyes bright—he looked as good as any hale and well-kept man of middle years would have looked, in the historically remote days when middle age could be distinguished from any other age. That was what those periodical visits to the hospital did for him. Though they couldn't make him immortal, like everyone else, they could at least do *that* much for his appearance and his general comity.

He sighed and rescued the red pantaloons from the floor. As he began to pull them on he thought: They can do all that, but they could not make him live for ever, like everyone else.

That wasn't an immediate threat. Rafiel was quite confident that he

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would live a while yet—well, quite a *long* while, if you measured it in days and seconds, perhaps another thirty years or so. But then he wouldn't live after that. And Docilia and Mosay and Victorium—yes, and lost Alegretta, too, and everyone else he had ever known—would perhaps take out the record of this new *Oedipus Rex* now and then and look at it and say to each other, "Oh, do you remember dear old Rafiel? How sweet he was. And what a pity." But dear old Rafiel would be *dead.*

4

The arcology Rafiel lives and works in rises 235 stories above central Indiana, and it has a population of 165,000 people. That's about average. From outside—apart from its size—the arcology looks more like something you'd find in a kitchen then a monolithic community. You might think of it as resembling the kind of utensil you would use to ream the juice out of an orange half (well, an orange half that had been stretched long and skinny), with its star-shaped cross section and its rounding taper to the top. Most of the dwelling units are in the outer ribs of the arcology's star. That gives a tenant a nice view, if he is the kind of person who really wants to look out on central Indiana. Rafiel isn't. As soon as he could afford it he moved to the more expensive inside condos overlooking the lively central atrium of the arcology, with all its glorious light and its graceful loops of flowering lianas and its wall-to-wall people—people on the crosswalks, people on their own balconies, even tiny, distant people moving about the floor level nearly two hundred stories below. To see all that is to see life. *From the outer apartments, what can you see? Only farmlands, and the radiating troughs of the maglev trains, punctuated by the to-the-horizon stretch of all the other arcologies that rose from the plain like the stubble of a monster beard.*

In spite of all Rafiel's assurances, Docilia insisted on getting dressed and escorting him back to his own place. She chattered all the way. "So this city you saved, *si chiama* Thebes," she was explaining to him as they got into the elevator, "was in a *hell* of a mess before you got there. Before Oedipus did, I mean. This Sphinx creature was just making *schrecklichkeit.* It was doing all kinds of rotten things—I don't know—like killing people, stealing their food, that sort of thing. I guess. Anyway, the whole city was just *desperate* for help, and then you came along to save them."

"And I killed the Sphinx, so they made me *roi de* Thebes out of gratitude?"

"*Certo!* Well, almost. You see, you don't have to *kill* it, exactly. It has this riddle that no one can figure out. You just have to solve its riddle, and then it I guess just goes kaput. So then you're their hero, Oedipus, but they don't exactly make you king. The way you get to be that is you marry the queen. That's me, Jocasta. I'm just a *pauvre petite* widow lady

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from the old dead king, but as soon as you marry me that makes you the *capo di tutti capi*. I'm still the queen, and I've got a brother, Creon, who's a kind of a king, too. But you're the boss." The elevator stopped, making her blink in slight surprise. "Oh, *siamo qui,*" she announced, and led the way out of the car.

Rafiel halted her with a hand on her shoulder. "I can find my way home from here. You didn't need to come with me at all, *verstehen sie?*"

"I wanted to, *piccina*. I thought you might be a little, well, wobbly."

"I am wobbly, all right," he said, grinning, "*mais pas* from being in the hospital." He kissed her, and then turned her around to face the elevator. Before he released her he said, "Oh, listen. What's this riddle of the Sphinx I'm supposed to solve?"

She gave him an apologetic smile over her shoulder. "It's kind of dopey. What goes on four legs, two legs and three legs, and is strongest on two? Can you imagine?"

He looked at her. "You mean you don't know the answer to that one?"

"Oh, but I do know the answer, Rafiel. Mosay told me what it was. It's—"

"Go on, Cele," he said bitterly. "*Auf wiedersehen*. The answer to the riddle is a 'man,' but I can see why it would be hard for somebody like you to figure it out."

Because, of course, he thought as he entered the lobby of his condo, none of these eternally youthful ones would ever experience the tottery, "three-legged," ancient-with-a-cane phase of life.

"Welcome back, Rafiel," someone called, and Rafiel saw for the first time that the lobby was full of paparazzi. They were buzzing at him in mild irritation, a little annoyed because they had missed him at the hospital, but nevertheless resigned to waiting on the forgivable whim of a superstar.

It was one of the things that Rafiel had had to resign himself to, long ago. It was a considerable nuisance. On the other hand, to be truthful, it didn't take much resignation. When the paps were lurking around for you, it proved your fame, and it was always nice to have renewed proof of that. He gave them a smile for the cameras, and a quick cut-and-point couple of steps of a jig—it was a number from his biggest success, the *Here's Hamlet!* of two years earlier. "Yes," he said, answering all their questions at once, "I'm out of the hospital, I'm back in shape, and I'm hot to trot on the new show that Mosay's putting together for me, *Oedipus Rex*." He started toward the door of his own flat. A woman put herself in his way.

"Raysia," she introduced herself, as though one name were enough for her, too. "I'm here for the interview."

He stopped dead. Then he recognized the face. Yes, one name was enough, for a top pap with her own syndicate. "Raysia, dear! *Cosi bella* to see you here, but—what interview are we talking about?"

"Your dramaturge set the appointment up last week," she explained. And, of course, that being so, there was nothing for Rafiel to do but to

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go through with it, making a mental note to get back to Mosay at the first opportunity to complain at not having been told.

But giving an interview was not a hard thing to do, after all, not with all the practice Rafiel had had. He fixed the woman up with a drink and a comfortable chair and took his place at the exercise barre in his study—he always liked to be working when he was interviewed, to remind them he was a dancer. First, though, he had a question. It might not have occurred to him if Docilia hadn't made him think of lost Alegretta, but now he had to ask it. He took a careful first position at the barre and swept one arm gracefully aloft as he asked, "Does your syndicate go to Mars?"

"Of course. I'm into *toutes les biosphères,*" she said proudly, "not just Mars, but Mercury and the moons and nearly every orbiter. As well as, naturally, the whole planet Earth."

"That's wonderful," he said, intending to flatter her and doing his best to sound as though this sort of thing hadn't ever happened to him before. Slowly, carefully, he did his barre work, hands always graceful, getting full extension on the legs, her camera following automatically as he answered her questions. Yes, he felt fine. Yes, they were going to get into production on the new *Oedipus* right away—yes, he'd heard the score, and yes, he thought it was wonderful. "And the playwright," he explained, "is the greatest writer who ever lived. Wonderful old Sophocles, two thousand nearly seven hundred years old, and the play's as fresh as anything today."

She looked at him with a touch of admiration for an actor who had done his homework. "Have you read it?"

He hadn't done *that* much homework, though he fully intended to. "Well, not in the original," he admitted, since a non-truth was better than a lie.

"I have," she said absently, thinking about her next question—disconcertingly, too. Rafiel turned around at the barre to work on the right leg for a while. Hiding the sudden, familiar flash of resentment.

"*Vous êtes* terrible," he chuckled, allowing only rueful amusement to show. "All of you! You *know* so much."

For they all did, and how unfair. Imagine! This child—this ancient twenty-year-old—reading a Greek play in the original, and not even Greek, he thought savagely, but whatever rough dialect had been spoken nearly three thousand years ago.

"*Mais pourquoi non*? We have time," she said, and got to her question. "How do you feel about the end of the play?" she asked.

"Where Oedipus blinds himself, you mean?" he tried, doing his best to sort out what he had been told of the story. "Yes, that's pretty bloody, isn't it? Stabbing out his own eyes, that's a very powerful—"

She was shaking her head. "No, *pas du tout,* I don't mean the blinding scene. I mean at the very end, where the chorus says"—her voice changed as she quoted—

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See proud Oedipus!
He proves that no mortal
Can ever be known to be happy
Until he is allowed to leave this life,
Until he is dead,
And cannot suffer any more.

She paused, fixing him with her eye while the camera zeroed in to catch every fleeting shade of expression on his face. "I'm not a very good translator," she apologized, "but do you feel that way, Rafiel? I mean, as a mortal?"

Actors grow reflexes for situations like that—for the times when a fellow player forgets a line, or there's a disturbance from the audience—when something goes *wrong* and everybody's looking at you and you have to deal with it. He dealt with it. He gave her a sober smile and opened his mouth. "*Hai,* that's so true, in a way," he heard his mouth saying. "*N'est-ce pas?* I mean, not just for me but, *credo,* for all of us? It doesn't matter however long we live, there's always that big final question at the end that we call death, and all we have to confront it with is courage. And that's the lesson of the story, I think: courage! To face all our pains and fears and go on anyway!"

It wasn't good, he thought, but it was enough. Raysia shut off her camera, thanked him, asked for an autograph and left; and as soon as the door was closed behind her Rafiel was grimly on the phone.

But Mosay wasn't answering, had shut himself off. Rafiel left him a scorching message and sat down, with a drink in his hand, to go through his mail. He was not happy. He scrolled quickly through the easy part—requests for autographs, requests for personal appearances, requests for interviews. He didn't have to do anything about most of them; he rerouted them through Mosay's office and they would be dealt with there. A note from a woman named Hillaree could not be handled in that way. She was a dramaturge herself—had he ever heard of her? He couldn't be sure; there were thousands of them, though few as celebrated as Mosay. Still, she had a proposition for Rafiel. She wanted to talk to him about a "wonderful" (she said) new script. The story took place on one of the orbiting space habitats, a place called *Hakluyt,* and she was, she said, convinced that Rafiel would be determined to do it, if only he would read the script.

Rafiel thought for a moment. He wasn't convinced at all. Still, on consideration, he copied the script to file without looking at it. Perhaps he would read the script, perhaps he wouldn't; but he could imagine that, in some future conversation with Mosay, it might be useful to be able to mention this other offer.

He sent a curt message to this Hillaree to tell her to contact his agent and then, fretful, stopped the scroll. He wasn't concentrating. Raysia's interview had bothered him. "We have time" indeed! Of course they did.

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They had endless time, time to learn a dead language, just for the fun of it, as Rafiel himself might waste an afternoon trying to learn how to bowl or paraglide at some beach. They *all* had time—all but Rafiel himself and a handful of other unfortunates like him—and it wasn't fair!

It did not occur to Rafiel that he had already had, in the nine decades since his birth, more lifetime than almost anyone in the long history of the human race before him. That was irrelevant. However much he had, everyone around him had so much *more*.

Still, in his ninety years of life Rafiel had learned a great deal—even actors could learn more than their lines, with enough time to do it in. He had learned to accept the fact that he was going to die, while everyone he knew lived on after him. He had even learned why this was so.

It was all a matter of the failings of the Darwinian evolution process.

In one sense, Darwinian evolution was one of the nicest things that had ever happened to life on Earth. In the selection of desirable traits to pass on to descendants—the famous "survival of the fittest"—virtue was rewarded. Traits that worked well for the organism were passed on, because the creatures that had them were more likely to reproduce than the ones lacking them.

Over the billions of years the process had produced such neat things—out of the unpromising single-celled creatures that began it all—as eyes, and anuses, and resistance to the diseases that other organisms wanted to give you, and ultimately even intelligence. That was the best development, in the rather parochial collective opinion of the intelligent human race. Smarts had turned out to be an evolutionary plus; that was why there were ten trillion human beings around, and hardly any of such things as the blue whale, the mountain gorilla and the elephant.

But there was one thing seriously wrong with the way the process works. From the point of view of the individual organism itself, evolution doesn't do a thing. Its benefits may be wonderful for the *next* generation, but it doesn't do diddly-squat for the organisms it is busily selecting, except to encourage the weaker ones to die before they get around to reproducing themselves.

That means that some very desirable traits that every human being would have liked to have—say, resistance to osteoporosis, or a wrinkle-free face—didn't get selected for in the Darwinian lottery. Longevity was not a survival feature. Once a person (or any other kind of animal) had its babies, the process switched itself off. Anything that benefited the organism after it was finished with its years of reproducing was a matter of pure chance. However desirable the new trait might have been, it wasn't passed on. Once the individual had passed the age of bearing young, the Darwinian score-keepers lost interest.

That didn't stop such desirable traits from popping up. Mutations appeared a million times which, if passed on, would have kept the lucky

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inheritors of subsequent generations hale for indefinite periods—avoiding, let us say, such inconveniences of age as going deaf at sixty, incontinent at eighty and mindless at the age of a hundred. But such genes came and went and were lost. As they didn't have anything to do with reproductive efficiency, they didn't get preserved. There wasn't any selective pass-through after the last babies were born.

So longevity was a do-it-yourself industry. There was no help from Darwin. But . . .

But once molecular biology got itself well organized, there were things that *could* be done. And were done. For most of the human population. But now and then, there were an unfortunate flawed few who missed out on the wonders of modern life-prolonging science because some undetectable and incurable quirks in their systems rejected the necessary treatment. . . .

Like Rafiel. Who scrolled through, without actually seeing, the scores of trivial messages—fan letters, requests for him to appear at some charitable function in some impossible place, bank statements, bills—that had arrived for him while he was away. And then, still fretful, turned off his communications and blanked his entertainment screen and even switched off the music as, out of habit and need, he practiced his leaps and entrechats in the solitude of his home, while he wondered bitterly what the point was in having a life at all, when you knew that it would sooner or later *end.*

5

People do still die now and then. It isn't just the unfortunates like Rafiel who do it, either, though of course they are the ones for whom it is inevitable. Even normal *people sometimes die as well. They die of accident, of suicide, of murder, sometimes just of some previously unknown sickness or even of a medical blunder that crashes the system. The normal people simply do not do that very* often. *Normal people expect to live normally extended lives. How long those lives can be expected to last is hard to say, because even the oldest persons around aren't yet much more than bicentenarians (that's the time since the procedures first became available), and they show no signs of old age yet. And, of course, since people do go on giving birth to other people, all that longevity has added up to quite an unprecedented population explosion. The total number of human beings living today is something over ten trillion—that's a one followed by thirteen zeroes—which is far more than the total number of previous members of the genus* Homo *in every generation since the first Neanderthalers appeared. Now the living overwhelmingly outnumber the dead.*

When Rafiel woke the next morning he found his good nature had begun to return. Partly it was the lingering wisps of his last designer

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dream—Alegretta had starred in it, as ordered, and that lost and cherished love of his life had never been more desirable and more desiring, for that matter, because that was the kind of dream he had specified. So he woke up in a haze of tender reminiscence. Anyway, even the terminally mortal can't dwell on their approaching demise all the time, and Rafiel was naturally a cheerful man.

Getting out of bed in the morning was a cheerful occasion, too, for he was surrounded with the many, many things he had to be cheerful about. As he breakfasted on what the servers brought him he turned on the vid tank and watched half a dozen tapes of himself in some of the highlights of his career. He was, he realized, quite good. In the tank his miniature self sang love ballads and jiving patter numbers and even arias, and his dancing—well, yes, now and then a bit trembly, he conceded to himself, but with *style*—was a delight to watch. Even for the person who had done it, but who, looking in the tank, could only see that imaged person as a separate and, really, very talented entity.

Cheerfully Rafiel moved to the barre to begin his morning warm-ups. He started gently, because he was still digesting his breakfast. There wasn't any urgency about it. Rehearsal call was more than an hour away, and he was contentedly aware that the person he had been looking at on the vid was a *star*.

In a world where the living far outnumbered the dead, space was precious. On the other hand, so was Rafiel, and stars were meant to be coddled. Mosay had taken a rehearsal room the size of a tennis court for Rafiel's own private use. The hall was high up in the arcology, and it wasn't just a big room. It was a very well-equipped one. It had bare powder-blue walls that would turn into any color Rafiel wanted them to be at the touch of a switch, a polished floor of real hardwood that clacked precisely to his taps, and, of course, full sound and light projection. Mosay, fussing over his star's accommodations, touched the keypad, and the obedient projectors transformed the bare walls into a glimmering throne room.

"I'm afraid that it's the wrong period, of course," Mosay apologized, looking without pleasure at the palace of Versailles, "no *roi soleil* in Thebes, is there, but I want you to get the feel of the kingship thing, *sapete?* We don't have the programs for the Theban backdrops yet. Actually I don't know if we will, because as far as my research people can tell, the Thebans really didn't have any actual thronerooms anyway."

"It doesn't matter," Rafiel said absently, slipping into his tap shoes.

"It does to me! You know how I am about authenticity." Seeing what Rafiel was doing Mosay hastily turned to touch the control keys again. Victorium's overture began to tinkle from the hidden sound system. "*C'est beau, le son?* It's just a synthesizer arrangement so far."

"It's fine," said Rafiel.

"Are you sure? Well, *bon*. Now, *bitte*, do you want to think about how you want to do the first big scene? That's the one where you're onstage

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with all the townspeople. They'll be the chorus. You're waiting to find out what news your brother-in-law, Creon, has brought back from the Delphic oracle; he went to find out what you had to do to get things straightened out in Thebes. . . ."

"I've read the script, of course," said Rafiel, who had in fact finished scrolling through it at breakfast.

"Of course you have," said Mosay, rebuked. "So I'll let you alone while you try working out the scene, shall I? Because I want to start checking out shooting locations tomorrow, and so I've got a million things to do today."

"Go and do them," Rafiel bade him. When the dramaturge was gone Rafiel lifted his voice and commanded, "Display text, scene one, from the top. With music."

The tinkling began again at once, and so did the display of the lines. The words marched along the upper parts of the walls, all four walls at once so that wherever Rafiel turned he saw them. He didn't want to dance at this point, he thought. Perhaps just march back and forth—yes, remembering that the character was lame—yes, and a king too, all the same. . . He began to pantomime the action and whisper the words of his part:

CHORUS: *Ecco* Creon, crowned with laurels.

"He's going to say," Rafiel half-sang in his turn, "what's wrong's our morals."

[ENTER CREON.]
CREON: *D'accord,* but I've still worse to follow.
It's not me speaking. It's Apollo.

Rafiel stopped the crawl there and thought for a second. There were some doubts in his mind. How well was that superstitious mumbo-jumbo going to work? You couldn't expect a modern audience to take seriously some mumble from a priestess. On the other hand, and equally of course, Oedipus had not been a modern figure. Would *he* have taken it seriously? Yes, Rafiel decided, he had to, or else the story made no sense to begin with. In playing Oedipus, then, the most he could do was to show a little tolerant exasperation at the oracle's nagging. So he started the accompaniment again, and mimed a touch of amused patience at Creon's line, turning his head away—

And caught a glimpse of an intruder watching him rehearse from the doorway.

It was a small, unkempt-looking young man in a lavender kilt. He was definitely not anyone Rafiel had seen as a member of Mosay's troupe and therefore no one who had a right to be here. Rafiel gave him a cold stare and decided to ignore him.

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He realized he'd missed a couple of Creon's lines, and his own response was coming up. He sang:

OEDIPUS: We'll take care of this hubble-bubble as
Soon as you tell us what the real trouble is.

But his concentration was gone. He clapped his hands to stop the music and turned to scowl at the intruder.

Who advanced to meet him, saying seriously, "I hope I'm not interfering. But on that line—"

Rafiel held up a forbidding hand. "Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm Charlus, your choreographer. Mosay said—"

"I do my own choreography!"

"Of course you do, Rafiel," the man said patiently. "You're *Rafiel.* I shouldn't have said choreographer, when all Mosay asked me to do was be your assistant. Do you remember me? From when you did *Make Mine Mars,* twenty years ago it must have been, and I tried out for the chorus line?"

Then Rafiel did identify him, but not from twenty years ago. "You sired Docilia's little one."

Charlus looked proud. "She told you, then? *Evvero.* We're both so happy—but, look, maestro, let me make a suggestion on that bubble-as, trouble-is bit. Suppose. . . "

And the man became Oedipus on the spot, as he performed a simultaneous obscene gesture and courtly bow, ending on one knee.

Rafiel pursed his lips, considering. It was an okay step. No, he admitted justly, it was more than that. It wasn't just an okay step, it was an okay *Rafiel* step, with just a little of Rafiel's well-known off-balance stagger as the right knee bumped the floor.

He made up his mind. "*Khorashaw,*" he said. "I don't usually work with anybody else, but I'm willing to give it a try."

"*Spasibo,* Rafiel," the man said humbly.

"*De nada.* Have you got any ideas about the next line?"

Charlus looked embarrassed. "*Hai,* sure, but *est-ce* possible to go back a little bit, to where you come in?"

"My first entrance, at the beginning of the scene?"

Charlus nodded eagerly. "Right there, *pensez-vous* we might try something real macho? You are a king, after all—and you can enter like. . . "

He turned and repeated Oedipus's entrance to the hall, but slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, with his head rocking and a ritualistic, high-stepping strut and turn before he descended sedately to a knee again. It was the same finish as the other step, but a world different in style and meaning.

Rafiel pursed his lips. "I like it," he said, meditating, "but do you think it really looks, well, Theban? I'd say it's *peut-être* basically Asian—maybe Thai?"

Charlus looked at him with new respect. "Close enough. It's *meno o*

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mino the Javanese *patjak-kulu* movement. Am I getting too eclectic for you?"

Rafiel acknowledged, "Well, I guess I'm pretty eclectic myself."

"I know," said Charlus, smiling.

While Charlus was showing the mincing little *gedruk* step he thought would be good for Jocasta, Mosay looked in, eyebrows elevated in the obvious question.

Charlus was tactful. "I've got to make a trip to the *benjo,*" he said, and Rafiel answered the unspoken question as soon as the choreographer was gone.

"Mind his helping out? No, I don't mind, Mosay. He's no performer himself, but as a choreographer, *hai,* he's *good.*" Rafiel was just. The man was not only good, he was bursting with ideas. Better still, it was evident that he had watched every show Rafiel had ever done, and knew Rafiel's style better than Rafiel did himself.

"*Bene, bene,*" Mosay said with absent-minded satisfaction. "When you hire the best people you get the best results. Oh, and *senti,* Rafiel"—remembering, as he was already moving toward the door—"those messages you forwarded to me? A couple of them were personal, so I routed them back to your machine. They'll be waiting for you. *Continuez, mes enfants.*" And a pat on the head for the returning Charlus and the dramaturge was gone, and they started again.

It was hard work, good work, with Rafiel happy with the way it was going, but long work, too; they barely stopped to eat a couple of sandwiches for lunch, and even then, though not actually dancing, Rafiel and Charlus were working with the formatting screen, moving computer-generated stick figures about in steps and groupings for the dance numbers of the show, Rafiel getting up every now and then to try a step, Charlus showing an arm gesture or a bob of the head to finish off a point.

By late afternoon Rafiel could see that Charlus was getting tired, but he himself was going strong. He had forgotten his hospital stay and was beginning to remember the satisfactions of collaboration. Having a second person help him find insights into the character and action was a great pleasure, particularly when that person was as unthreatening as the eager and submissive Charlus. "So now," Rafiel said, toweling some sweat away, "we're up to where we've found out that Thebes won't get straight until the assassin of the old king is found and punished, right? And this is where I sing my vow to the gods—"

"*Permesso?*" Charlus said politely. And took up a self-important strut, half tap, almost cakewalk, swinging his lavender kilt as he sang the lines: "I swear, without deceit or bias, We'll croak the rat who croaked King Laius."

"Yes?" said Rafiel, reserving judgment.

"And then Creon gives you the bad news. He tells you that, *corpo di bacco,* things are *bad.* The oracle says that the murderer is here in Thebes. I think right there is when you register the first suspicion that

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there's something funny going on. You know? Like . . . " miming someone suddenly struck by an unwanted thought.

"You don't think that's too early?"

"It's what you think that counts, Rafiel," Charlus said submissively, and looked up toward the door.

Mosay and Docilia were looking in, the dramaturge with a benign smile, Docilia with a quick kiss for Rafiel and another for Charlus. Although their appearance was a distraction, the kiss turned it into the kind of distraction that starts a new and pleasing line of thought; Docilia was in white again, but a minimum of white: a short white wrap-around skirt, a short wraparound bolero on top, with bare flesh between and evidently nothing at all underneath. "Everything going all right?" the dramaturge asked, and answered himself: "Of course it is; it's going to be a *merveille du monde.* Dear ones, I just stopped by to tell you that I'm leaving you for a few days; I'm off to scout out some locations for shooting."

Rafiel took his eyes off Docilia and blinked at him. "We're going to make *Oedipus* on location?"

"I insist," said Mosay firmly. "No *faux* backgrounds; I want the real thing for *Oedipus!* We're going to have a Thebes that even the Thebans would admire, if there were any of them left."

Charlus cleared his throat. "Is Docilia going with you?" he asked.

That question had not occurred to Rafiel to ask, but once it was asked he wanted to know the answer, too. Mosay was looking thoughtfully at the choreographer. "Well," he said, "I thought she might have some ideas. . . . Why do you want to know that?"

Charlus had an answer ready. "Because we've started to work out some of the *pas de deux* routines, and Docilia ought to have a chance to try them out." Rafiel did not think it was a truthful one.

Evidently Mosay didn't either. He pursed his lips, considering, but Docilia answered for him. "Of course I should," she said. "You go on without me, Mosay. Have a nice trip; I'll see you when you get back. Only please, dear, try to find a place that isn't too *hot.* I sweat so when I'm dancing, you know."

Whatever plans Charlus had for Docilia, they were postponed. When at last they were through rehearsing, Docilia kissed the choreographer absently and pulled Rafiel along with her out of the room before Charlus could speak. "*J'ai molto faim,* dear," she said—but only to Rafiel, "and I've booked a table for us."

In the elevator, Rafiel looked at her thoughtfully. "Didn't Charlus want to see you?"

She smiled up at him, shrugging. "But he acted as though he didn't want you to go off with Mosay," Rafiel persisted. "Or with me either, for that matter. Is he, well, jealous?"

"Oh, Rafiel! What a terrible word that is, jealous. Are you thinking of, what, the Othello thing?"

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"He's the father of your child," Rafiel pointed out uncomfortably.

"*Mais oui,* but why should he be jealous if I'm shtupping you or Mosay, *liebling?* I shtup him too, whenever he likes—when I don't have another date, of course. Come and eat a nice dinner, and stop *worrying.*"

They walked together to their table—not on a balcony this time, but on a kind of elevated dais at the side of the room, so they could be well seen. It was the kind of place where theater people gathered, at the bottom of the atrium. Tables in the open surrounded the fiftieth-floor rooftop lake. There was a net overhead to catch any carelessly dropped objects, and from time to time they could hear the whine of the magnets pulling some bit of trash away. But nothing ever struck the diners. The place was full of children, and Docilia smiled at every one of them, practicing her upcoming motherhood. And swans floated in the lake, and stars were woven into the net overhead.

When the servers were bringing their monkey-orange juice Rafiel remembered. "Speaking of Charlus. He had an idea for your scene at the end. You know? Just before you go to hang yourself? As you're going out. . . "

He looked around to see who was looking at them, then decided to give the fans a treat. He stood up, and in the little cleared space between their table and the railing, did the step Charlus had called "*gedruk,*" mincing and swaying his hips. It was not unnoticed. Soft chuckles sounded from around the dining room. "Oh, maybe yes," Docilia said, nodding, pleased. "It gets a laugh, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Rafiel, "but that's the thing. Do we want *comedy* here? I mean, you're just about to die. . . "

"Exactly, dear," she said, not understanding. "That's why it will be twice as funny in the performance."

"*Aber* a *morceau* incongruous, don't you think? Comedy and death?"

She was more puzzled than ever. "*Hai,* that's what's funny, isn't it? I mean, *dying.* That's such a bizarre thing, it always makes the audience laugh." And then, when she saw his face, she bit her lip. "*Pas* all that funny for everybody, is it?" she said remorsefully. "You're so *normal,* dear Rafiel. Sometimes I just forget."

He shrugged and forgave her. "You know more about that than I do," he admitted, knowing that he sounded still grumpy—glad when a famous news comic came over to chat. Being the kind of place it was, table-hopping was, of course, compulsory. As pleased as Rafiel at the interruption, Docilia showed her tomographs of the baby to the comic and got the required words of praise.

Then it was Rafiel's turn to blunder. "What sort of surrogate are you using?" he asked, to make conversation, and she gave him a sharp look.

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"Did somebody tell you? No? Well, it's cow," she said, and waited to see what his response would be. She seemed aggrieved. When all he did was nod noncomittally, she said, "Charlus wanted to use something fancier. Do you think I did the right thing, Rafiel? Insisting on an ordinary cow surrogate, I mean? So many people are using water buffalo now. . . ."

He laughed at her. "I wouldn't know, would I? I've never been a parent."

"Well, I have, and believe me, Rafiel, it isn't easy. What *difference* does it make, really, what kind of animal incubates your child for you? But Charlus says it's important and, oh, Rafiel, we had such a battle over it!"

She shook her head, mourning the obstinacy and foolishness of men. Then she decided to forgive. "It isn't altogether his fault, I suppose. He's worried. Especially now. Especially because it's almost *fin* the second trimester and that means it's time—"

She came to a quick halt, once more biting her lip. Rafiel knew why: it was more suddenly remembered tact. The end of the second trimester was when they had to do the procedure to make the child immortal, because at that point the fetal immune system wasn't developed yet and they could manipulate it in the ways that would make it live essentially for ever.

"That's a scary time, I know," said Rafiel, to be comforting, but of course he did know. Everyone knew he knew, and why he knew. The operation was serious for a little fetus. A lot of them died, when the procedure didn't work—or managed to survive, but with their natural immune systems mortally intact. Like Rafiel.

"Oh, *mon cher,*" she said, "you know I didn't mean anything *personal* by that!"

"Of course you didn't," he said reassuringly; but all the same, the happy buzz of the day's good rehearsing was lost, the evening's edge was gone, and long before they had finished their leisurely supper, he had abandoned any plan of inviting her back to his condo for the night.

It did spoil the evening for him. Too early for sleep, too late to make any other arrangements, he wandered alone through his condo. He tried reading, but it seemed like a lot of effort. He glanced toward the barre, but his muscles were sore enough already from the day's work-out. He switched on the vid, roaming the channels to see if there was anything new and good, but there wasn't. A football series coming to its end in Katmandu, an election in Uruguay—who cared about such things? He paused over a story about a habitat now being fitted out with engines to leave the solar system: it was the one named *Hakluyt* and it held his

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interest for a moment because of that silly woman, Hillaree, with her script. It would be interesting, he thought, to take that final outward leap to another star. . . . Of course, not for him, who would be long dead before the expedition could hope to arrive. He switched to the obituaries—his favorite kind of news—but the sparse list held no names that interested him. He switched again to the entertainment channels. There was a new situation comedy that he had heard about. The name was *Dachau,* and he remembered that one of the parts was played by a woman he had slept with a few times, years ago. Now she was playing a—a what?—a concentration-camp guard in Germany in World War II, it seemed. It was a comic part; she was a figure of fun as the Jews and Gypsies and political enemies who were inmates constantly mocked and outwitted her. It did have its funny bits. Rafiel laughed as one of the inmates, having escaped to perform some heroic espionage feat for the Allies, was sneaked back into the camp under the very eyes of the commandant. Still, he wondered if things had really ever been that *jolly* in the real concentration camps of the time, where the real death ovens burned all day and all night.

It all depended on whether you were personally involved, he thought.

And then he switched it off, thinking of Docilia. He shouldn't have been so curt with her. She couldn't help being what she was. If death seemed comical to the deathless, was that her fault? Hadn't most of the world, for centuries on end, found fun in the antics of the dwarves and the deformed, even making them jesters at their courts? Perhaps the hunchbacks themselves hadn't found anything to laugh at—but that was *their* point of view.

As his attitude toward dying was his own.

He thought for a moment of calling Docilia to apologize—perhaps the evening might be salvaged yet. Then he remembered what Mosay had said about personal messages and scrolled them up.

The first one was personal, all right, and a surprise. It was a talking message, and as soon as the picture cleared he recognized the face of the man who happened to have been his biological father.

The man hadn't changed a bit. (Well, why would he, in a mere ninety-some years?) He was as youthful and as handsome as he had been when, on a rare visit, he had somewhat awkwardly taken young Rafiel on his knee. "I saw you were in the *krankhaus* again," the man in the screen said, with the look of someone who was paying a duty call on an ailing friend—not a close one, though. "It reminded me we haven't heard from each other in a long time. I'm glad everything *fait bon,* Rafiel—son—and, really, you and I ought to have lunch together some *prossimo giorno.*"

That was it. Rafiel froze the picture before it disappeared, to study the

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dark, well-formed face of the man whose genes he had carried. But the person behind the face eluded him. He sighed, shrugged and turned to the other message. . . .

And that one made him stiffen in his chair, with astonishment too sharp to be joy.

It wasn't an imaged message, or even a spoken one; it was a faxed note, in a crabbed, nearly illegible handwriting that he knew very well:

> Dearest Rafiel, I was so glad to hear you got through another siege with the damned doctors. *Mazel tov.* I'm sending you a little gift to celebrate your recovery—and to remind you of me, because I think of you so very often.

What the gift was he could not guess, because it hadn't arrived yet, but the note was signed, most wonderfully signed:

> For always, your Alegretta.

6

Naturally, all kinds of connections and antipathies appear among the Oedipus *troupe as they come together. Charlus is the sire of Docilia's unborn child. Andrev, who is to play the Creon, is the son of the composer of the score, Victorium. Ormeld, the Priest, and Andrev haven't acted together for thirty-five years, because of a nasty little firefight over billing in what happened to be the first production in which either got an acting credit. (They hug each other with effusive but wary joy when they come together in the rehearsal hall.) Sander, the Tiresias, studied acting under Mosay when Mosay had just abandoned his own dramatic career (having just discovered how satisfying the god-behind-the-scenes role of a dramaturge was). Sander is still just a little awed by his former teacher. All these interconnections are quite separate from the ordinary who-had-been-sleeping-with-whom sort of thing. They had to be kept that way. If people dragged up* that *sort of ancient history they'd never get everything straight. Actually, nobody is dragging anything up—at least, not as far as the surface where it can be seen. On the contrary. Everybody is being overtly amiable to everybody else and conspicuously consecrated to the show, so far. True, they haven't yet had much chance to be anything else, since it's only the first day of full-cast rehearsal.*

Although Mosay was still off scouting for locations—somewhere in *Turkey*, somebody said, though why anybody would want to go to *Turkey* no one could imagine—he had taken time to talk to them all by grid on the first day. "Line up, everybody," he ordered, watching them through the monitor over his camera. "What I want you to do is just a quick run-through of the lines. Don't sing. Don't dance, don't even act—we just

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want to say the words and see each other. Docilia, please leave Charlus alone for a minute and pay attention. Victorium will proctor for me, while I"—a small but conspicuous sigh; Mosay had not forgotten his acting skills—"keep trying to find the *right* location for our production."

Actually it was Rafiel who was paying least attention, because his mind was full of lost Alegretta. Now, perhaps, found again? For you never forgot your first love. . . .

Well, yes, you did, sometimes, but Rafiel never had. Never could have, in spite of the sixty or seventy—could it have been eighty? a hundred?—other women he had loved, or at least made love to, in the years since then. Alegretta had been something very special in his life.

He was twenty years old then, a bright young certain-to-be-a-star song and dance man. Audiences didn't know that yet, because he was still doing the kind of thing you had to start out with, cheap simulations and interactives, where you never got to make your own dramatic *statement.* The trade was beginning to know him, though, and Rafiel was quite content to be working his way up in the positive knowledge that the big break was sure to come. (And it had come, no more than a year later.)

But just then he had, of all things, become sick. (No one got *sick!*) When the racking cough began to spoil his lines, he had to do something. He complained to his doctors about it. Somewhat startled (people didn't *have* coughs), the doctors put him in a clinic for observation, because they were as discomfited by it as Rafiel himself. And when all the tests were over, the head resident herself came to his hospital room to break the bad news.

Even all these decades later, Rafiel remembered exactly what she had looked like that morning. Striking. Sexy, too; he had noticed that right away, in spite of the circumstances. A tall woman, taller in fact than Rafiel himself; with reddish-brown hair, a nose with a bit of a bend in it that kept it from being perfect in any orthodox way, but a smile that made up for it all. He had looked at her, made suspicious by the smile, a little hostile because a little scared. She sat down next to him, no longer smiling. "Rafiel," she said directly, "I have some bad news for you."

"*Che c'e?* Can't you fix this damn cold?" he said, irritated.

She hesitated before she answered. "Oh, yes, we can cure *that.* We'll have it all cleared up by morning. But you see, you shouldn't have a cough at all now. It means . . . " she paused, obviously in some pain. "It means the procedure didn't work for you," she said at last, and that was how Alegretta told Rafiel that he was doomed to die in no more than another hundred years, at most.

When he understood what she was saying, he listened quietly and patiently to all the explanations that went with it. Queerly, he felt sorrier for her than for himself—just then he did, anyway; later on, when it had all sunk in, it was different. But as she was telling him that such failures were very rare, but still they came up now and then, and at least he had survived the attempt, which many unborn babies did not, he interrupted

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her. "I don't think you should be a doctor," he told her, searching her lovely face.

"Why not?" she asked.

"You take it too hard. You can't stand giving bad news."

She said soberly, "I haven't had much practice at it, have I?"

He laughed at her. She looked at him in surprise, but then, he was still in his twenties, and a promise of another hundred years seemed close enough to forever. "Practice on me," he urged. "When I'm released, let's have dinner."

They did. They had a dozen dinners, those first weeks, and breakfasts too, because that same night he moved into her flat above the hospital wing. They stayed together nearly two weeks; and there had never been another woman like her. "I'll never tell," she promised when they parted. "It's a medical confidence, you know. A secret." She never had told, either.

And his career did blossom. In those days, Rafiel didn't need to be an oddity to be a star, he became a star because he was so damn good.

It was only later on that he became an oddity as well because, though Alegretta had never told, there were a lot of other checkups, and ultimately somebody else had.

It had not mattered to Rafiel, then, that Alegretta was nearly a hundred to his twenty. Why should it? Such things made no difference in a world of eternal youth. Alegretta did not look one minute older than himself . . . And it was only later, when she had left him, and he was miserably trying to figure out why, that he realized the meaning of the fact that she never would.

First run-throughs didn't matter much. All they were really for was to get the whole cast together, to get some idea of their lines and what the relationship of each character was to the others, who was what to whom. They didn't act, much less sing; they read their lines at half-voice, eyes on the prompter scroll on the wall more than each other. It didn't matter that Rafiel's mind was elsewhere. When others were onstage he took out the fax from Alegretta and read it again. And again. But he wasn't, he thought, any more inattentive than any of the others. The pretty young Antigone—what was her real name? Bruta? Something like that—was a real amateur, and amateurishly she kept trying to move toward stage front each time she spoke. Which was not often; and didn't matter, really, because when Mosay came back he would take charge of that sort of thing in his gentle, irresistible way. And Andrev, the Creon, had obviously never even looked at the script, while Sander, who was to play the blind prophet, Tiresias, complained that there wasn't any point in doing all this without the actual dramaturge being present. Victorium had his hands full.

But he was dealing with it. When they had finished the quick run-through he dispatched Charlus to start on the choreography of the first scene, where all the Thebans were reciting for the audience their opening

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misery under the Sphinx. Rafiel was reaching in his pocket for another look at the fax when Victorium came over. "*Sind sie* okay, Rafiel?" he asked. "I thought you seemed just a little absent-minded."

"*Pas du tout,*" Rafiel said, stuffing the letter away. Then, admitting it, "Well, just a little, *forse.* I, ah, had a letter from an old friend."

"Yes," Victorium said, nodding. "Mosay said something about it. Alegretta, was that her name?"

Rafiel shrugged, not letting his annoyance show. Of course Mosay had known all about Alegretta because Mosay made it a point to know everything there was to know about every one of his artists; but to pry into private mail, and then to discuss it with others, was going too far.

"Old lovers can still make the heart beat faster, can't they?" he said.

"Yes?" Victorium said, not meaning to sound skeptical, but obviously not troubled with any such emotions himself. "Has it been a long time? Will you be seeing her again?"

"Oh"—startled by the thought, almost afraid of it—"no, I don't think so. No, probably not—she's a long way away. She seems to be in one of the orbiters now. You know she used to be a doctor? But now she's given up medicine, doing some kind of science now."

"She sounds like a very interesting person," Victorium said neutrally—a little absent-minded himself, too, because in the center of the room Charlus had started showing the Thebans the dance parts, and Victorium had not failed to catch the sounds of his own music. Still looking at the Thebans, Victorium said "Mosay asked me to show you the rough simulation for the opening. Let's go over to the small screen—oh, hell," he said interrupting himself, "can you *pardonnez-moi* a minute? *Verdammt,* Charlus has got them *hopping* when the music's obviously *con vivace.* I'll be right back."

Rafiel listened to the raised voices, giving them his full willed attention in order to avoid a repetition of the rush of feeling that Victorium's casual suggestion had provoked. Charlus seemed to be winning the argument, he thought, though the results would not be final until Mosay returned to ratify them. It was a fairly important scene. Antigone, Ismene, Polyneices, and Eteocles—the four children of Oedipus and Jocasta—were doing a sort of *pas de quatre* in tap, arms linked like the cygnets in *Swan Lake,* while they sang a recapitulation of how Oedipus came and saved them from the horrid Sphinx. The chorus was being a real chorus, in fact a chorus line, tapping in the background and, one by one, speaking up—a potter, a weaver, a soldier, a household slave—saying yes, but things are going badly now and something must be *done.* Then Rafiel would make his entrance as Oedipus and the story would roll on . . . but not today.

Victorium was breathing hard when he rejoined Rafiel. "You can ignore all that," he said grimly, "because I'm sure Mosay isn't going to let that *dummkopf* dance-teacher screw up the *grand ensemble.* Never mind." He snapped on the prompter monitor to show what he and Mosay had programmed for the under-the-credits opening. "Let's get down your

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part here. This is before the actual story begins, showing you and the Sphinx."

Rafiel gave it dutiful attention. Even in preliminary stick-figure simulation, he saw that the monster on the screen was particularly unpleasant-looking, like a winged reptile. "*Che* the hell *cosa* is that?"

"It's the Sphinx, of course. What else would it be?" Victorium said, stopping the computer simulation so Rafiel could study the creature.

"It doesn't look like a sphinx to me. It looks like a crocodile."

"Mosay," Victorium said with satisfaction, "looked it up. Thebes was a city on the Nile, you know. The Nile is *famous* for crocodiles. They sacrificed people to them."

"But this one has wings."

"*Perché no?* You're probably thinking of that other Egyptian sphinx. The old one out of the desert? This one's different. It's a *Theban* sphinx, and it looks like whatever Mosay says it looks like." Victorium gave him the look of someone who would like to chide an actor for wasting time with irrelevant details—if the actor hadn't happened to be the star of the show. "The important thing is that it was terrorizing the whole city of Thebes, after their *ancien roi,* Laius, got murdered, until you came along and got rid of it for them. Which, of course, is why the Thebans let you marry Jocasta and be their *nouveau roi.*" He thought for a moment. "I'll have to write some new music for the Sphinx to sing the riddle, but," he said wistfully, "Mosay says we don't want too much song and dance here because, see, *tutta qui* is just a kind of prologue. It isn't in the Sophocles play. We'll just run it under the credits to mise the scene—oh, *merde.* What's that?"

He was looking at the tel window on the screen, where Rafiel's name had begun to flash.

"Somebody's calling me, I guess," Rafiel said.

"You shouldn't be getting personal calls during rehearsal, should you?" he chided. Then he shrugged. "*San ferian.* See who it is, will you?"

But when Rafiel tapped out his acceptance no picture appeared on the screen, just a voice. It wasn't even the voice of a "who." It was the serene, impersonal voice of his household server, and it said:

"A living organism had been delivered to you. It is a gift. I have no program for caring for living creatures. Please instruct me."

"Now who in the world," Rafiel marveled, "would be sending me a *pet?*"

It wasn't anyone in the world—not the planet Earth, anyway; as soon as Rafiel saw the note pinned to the cage, where the snow-white kitten purred contentedly inside, he knew who it was from.

> This is my favorite cat's best kitten, dear Rafiel. I hope you'll love it as much as I do.

Rafiel found himself laughing out loud. How strange of Alegretta. How

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dear, too! Imagine anyone keeping a *pet*. It was not the kind of thing immortals were likely to do. Who wanted to get attached to some living thing that was sure to die in only a few years—only a moment, in the long lifetime of people now alive? (Most of them, anyway.) But it was a sweet thought, and a sweet little kitten, he found as he uneasily picked it up out of the cage and set it on his lap. The pretty little thing seemed comfortable there, still purring as it looked up at him out of sleepy blue eyes.

Most important, it was a gift from Alegretta. He was smiling as, careful not to disturb the little animal, he began searching his data bases for instructions on the care and feeding of kittens.

7

Rafiel has decided not to make love to Docilia again. He isn't sure why. He suspects it has something to do with the fact that the sire of her child is always nearby, which makes him uncomfortable. It isn't just that they've collaborated on creating a fetus that makes him shy off, it is more the fact that they intend to be a family. It is only later that he realizes that that means he can't bed any of the other members of the troupe, either. Not the Antigone, the little girl named Bruta, though she has asked him to—not even though she happens to have interested him at first, since she has auburn hair and her nose is not perfectly straight. (Perhaps it is because *she looks a little bit like Alegretta that he especially doesn't want to make love to her.) Not any of them, in spite of the fact that, all through his performing life, Rafiel has seldom failed to make love in person to every female he was required to make love to in the performance, on the principle that it added realism to his art. (He wasn't particularly attracted to most of those women, either, only prepared to make sacrifices for his art.) This time, no. The only sensible reason he can give himself for his decision is that Docilia would surely find out, and it would hurt her feelings to be passed over for the others.*

None of this inordinate chastity was because he didn't desire sexual intercourse. On the contrary. He didn't need to program designer dreams of love-making. His subconscious did all the programming he needed. Almost every morning he woke from dreams of hot and sweaty quick encounters and dreamily long-drawn-out ones. The root of the problem was that, although he wanted to do it, he didn't want to do it *with* anyone he knew. (One possible exception always noted, but always inaccessible.) So he slept alone. When, one morning, some slight noise woke him with the scent of perfumed woman in his nose he supposed it was a lingering dream. Then he opened his eyes. A woman was there, in his room, standing by a chair and just stepping out of the last of her clothing. "Who the hell are you?" he shouted as he sat up.

The woman was quite naked and entirely composed. She sat on the

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edge of his bed and said, "I'm Hillaree. You looked so sexy there, I thought I might as well just climb in."

"How the hell did you get into my condo?"

"I'm a dramaturge," she said simply. "How much would you respect me if I let your doorwarden keep me out?"

Rafiel turned in the bed to look at her better. She was a curly-headed little thing, with a wide, serious mouth, and he was quite sure he had never seen her before.

But he had heard her name, he realized. "Oh, *that* dramaturge," he said, faintly remembering a long-ago message.

"The dramaturge who has a wonderful part for you," she confirmed, "if you have intelligence enough to accept it." She patted his head in a friendly way, and stood up.

"If you want me for a part, you should talk to my agent," he called after her.

"Oh, I did that, Rafiel. She threw me out." Hillaree was rummaging through the heap of her discarded clothing on the bedside chair. She emerged with a lapcase, which she carried back to the bed. "I admit this isn't going to be a *big* show," she told him, squatting crosslegged on his bed as she opened the screen from the case. "I'm not Mosay. I don't do *spectacoli*. But people are travelling out to the stars, Rafiel. The newest one is a habitat called *Hakluyt*. The whole population has voted to convert their habitat into an interstellar space vehicle—"

"I know about that!" he snapped, more or less truthfully. "Habitat people have done that before—last year, wasn't it? Or a couple of years ago? I think one was going to Alpha Centauri or somewhere."

"You see? You don't even remember. No one else does, either, and yet it's a grand, *heroic* story! These people are doing something hard and dangerous. No, Rafiel," she finished, wagging her pretty head, "it's the greatest story of our time and it needs to be told *dramatically*, so people will *comprehend* it. And I'm the one to tell it, and you're the one to play it. Oh, it won't be like a Mosay production, I'll give you that. But you'll never again see anything as right for you as the part of the captain of the kosmojet *Hakluyt*."

"I don't know anything about kosmojets, do I? Anyway, I can't. Mosay already had one cacafuega attack when he heard a rumor about it."

"*Fichtig* Mosay. He and I don't do the same kind of thing. This one will be *intimate*, and *personal. Pas* music, *pas* dancing, *pas* songs. It will be a whole new departure for your career."

"But a song-and-dance man is what I am!"

She sniffed at him. "You're a short-timer, Rafiel. You're going to get *old*. Listen to me. This is where you need to go. I've watched you. I'm willing to bet my reputation—"

"Your reputation!"

She ignored the interruption. "—that you're just as good an actor as you are a dancer and singer . . . and, just to make you understand what's

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involved here, you can have five points on the gross receipts, which you know you'll *jamais* get from Mosay."

"Five per cent of not very much is still very little," Rafiel said at once, grinning at her to show that he meant no hard feelings.

She nodded as though she had expected that. She opened her bag and fingered the keypad for her screen. "May I?" she said perfunctorily, not waiting for an answer. A scroll of legal papers began to roll up the screen. "This is the deal for the first broadcast," she said. "That's twenty million dollars from right here on Earth, plus another twenty million for the first-run remotes. Syndication: that's a contract with a guarantee of another forty million over a ten-year period. And all that's minimum, Rafiel; I'd bet anything that it'll double that. And there are the contracts for the sub rights—the merchandising, the music. Add it all up, and you'll see that the *guarantee* comes pretty close to a hundred million dollars. What's five percent of that, Rafiel?"

The question was rhetorical. She wasn't waiting for an answer. She was already scrolling to the next display, not giving Rafiel a chance to order her out of his condo. "*Là!*" she said, "*Voici!*"

What they were looking at on the screen was a habitat. It was not an impressive object to the casual view. As in all pictures from space, there was no good indication of size, and the thing might have been a beverage can, floating in orbit.

"There's where our story is," she said. "What you see there is habitat *Hakluyt*. It starts with a population of twenty thousand people, with room to expand to five times that. It's a whole small town, Rafiel. The kind of town they used to have in the old days before the arcologies, you know? A place with everybody knowing everybody else, interacting, loving, hating, dreaming—and totally cut off from everyone else. It's a microcosm of humanity, right there on *Hakluyt,* and we're going to tell its story."

Although Rafiel was looking at the woman's pictures, he didn't think them very interesting. As far as Rafiel could tell, *Hakluyt* was a perfectly ordinary habitat, a stubby cylinder with the ribs for the pion tracks circling its outer shell. What he could tell wasn't actually very much. He hadn't spent much time on habitats, only one two-week visit, once, with—with . . . ? No, he had long since forgotten the name of the companion of that trip, and indeed everything about the trip itself except that habitats were not particularly luxurious places to spend one's time.

"How much spin does this thing have?" he asked, out of technical curiosity. "I'm not used to dancing in light-G."

"When it's en route *pas* spin at all. The gravity effect will be along the line of thrust. But you're forgetting, Rafiel," she chided him. "There won't be any dancing anyway. That's why this is such a breakthrough for you. This is a dramatic *story,* and you'll act it!"

"Hum," said Rafiel, not pleased with this woman's continuing reminders that, in his special case, becoming older meant that it would become harder and harder for him to keep in dancer's kind of shape. "Why do

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you say they're cut off from the rest of the world? Habitats are a lot easier to get to than, *per esempio,* Mars. There's always a stream of ships going back and forth."

"Not to this habitat," Hillaree told him confidently. "You're missing the point, and that's the whole drama of our story. You see that cluster of motors on the base? *Hakluyt* isn't just going to stay in orbit. *Hakluyt* will be going all the way to the star Tau Ceti. They'll be cut off, all right. They aren't coming back to the Earth, ever."

As soon as the woman was out of his condo, unbedded but also unrejected, or at least not *finally* rejected in the way that most mattered to her, Rafiel was calling his agent to complain. Fruitlessly. It was a lot too early in the morning for Jeftha to be answering her tel. He tried again when he got to the rehearsal hall, with the same "No Incoming" icon appearing on the screen. "Bitch," he said to the screen, though without any real resentment—Jeftha was as good a talent agent as he had ever had—and joined the rest of the cast.

They had started without him. Charlus was drilling the chorus all over again and Victorium, with Docilia standing by, was impatiently waiting for Rafiel himself. "Now," he said, "If you're *quite* ready to go to work? Here's where we come to a tricky kind of place in *Oedipus.* You've ordered Creon banished, in spite of the fact that he's your brother-in-law. You think he lied to you about the prophecy from Apollo's priests, and you've just found out that your wife, Jocasta, is also your mother—"

"Victorium dear," Docilia began, "that's something I wanted to talk about. I don't have enough lines there, do I? Since it's *per certo* as big a shock to me too?"

"You'd have to talk to Mosay about that when he gets back, Docilia dear," Victorium said. "Can't we stick to the point? Besides the incest thing, Rafiel, you're the one who murdered her husband, who is also your real father—"

"I've read the script," Rafiel told him.

"Of course you have, Rafiel dear," Victorium said, sounding much less confident of it. "Then we follow you into Jocasta's room, and you see that she hung herself, out of shame."

"Can't I do that on-screen, Vic?" Docilia asked. "I mean, committing suicide's a really dramatic moment."

"I don't think so, dear, but that's another thing you'd have to talk to Mosay about. Anyway, it's not the point right now, is it? I'm talking about what Rafiel does when he sees you've committed suicide."

"I take the pins out of her hair and blind myself with them," said Rafiel, nodding.

"Right. You jab the gold hairpins into your eyes. That's what I'm thinking about. What's the best way for us to handle that?"

"How do you mean?" Rafiel asked, blinking at him.

"Well, we want it to look *real,* don't we?"

"Sure," Rafiel said, surprised, not understanding the point. That sort

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of thing was up to the computer synthesizers, which would produce any kind of effect anybody wanted.

Victorium was thoughtfully silent. Docilia cleared her throat. "On second thought," she said, "maybe it's better if I hang myself offstage after all."

Victorium stirred and gave her a serious look. Then he surrendered. "We'll talk about all this stuff later," he said. "Let me get Charlus off everybody's back and we'll try putting the scene after that together."

Rafiel was surprised to see Docilia give him a serious wink, but whatever she had on her mind had to wait. Victorium was calling them all together. "All right," he said, "let's run it through. All the bad stuff is out in the open now. Rafiel knows what he's done, and all four of you kids are onstage now in the forgiveness scene. Ket, you're the Polyneices, take it from the top."

Obediently the quartet formed and the boy began to sing:

> POLYNEICES: We forgive you. If you doubt it, ask that zany
> Antigone, or Eteocles, or sweet Ismene.
> ETEOCLES: You can't be all that bad.
> ISMENE: After all, *vous êtes* our dad.

"Now you, Rafiel," Victorium said, nodding, and Rafiel took up his lines.

> OEDIPUS: Calm? *Come possibile* for me to be calm?
> I've killed my pop and shtupped my dear old mom.
> ANTIGONE: It's okay, dad, we're all with you.
> It'll be a lousy life but we'll be true.
> Wherever you go—

"No, no," Charlus cried, breaking in. "Excuse me, Victorium, but no. Bruta, this is *tap*, not ballet. Keep your feet down on the floor, will you?"

"*Aspet!*" Victorium snapped. "I'm running this rehearsal, and if you keep interrupting—"

"But she's ruining it, don't you see?" the choreographer pleaded. "Just give me a minute with her. Please? Bruta, I want you to tap on the turn, and give us a little disco hip rotation when you sing. And I want to hear every tap all by itself, loud and clear . . . "

There was, naturally, more objection from Victorium. Rafiel backed away to watch, not directly involved, and turned when he felt Docilia plucking at his arm.

"Be real careful," she whispered. "Don't let Mosay push you into anything. I think he wants you to really do it. The blinding," she added impatiently when she saw that he hadn't understood.

Rafiel stared at her to see if she was joking. She wasn't. "Believe me, that's what he wants from you," she said, nodding. "No faking it. He wants real blood. Real pain. Pieces of eyeball hanging out on your cheek."

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"Docilia!" he said, grimacing.

"*Was ist das* 'Docilia'? *Voi sapete* how Mosay is. Oh, maybe he wouldn't expect you to *permanently* blind yourself. After the shooting was over he'd pay so the doctors could graft in some new eyes for you—but still."

"Mosay wouldn't ask anybody to do that," Rafiel protested.

"Wouldn't he? Especially considering— Well, when he comes back, just ask him," she said, and stopped there.

Rafiel had grasped her meaning, anyway. Especially considering could only be that, in the long run, they were beginning to be looking on him as expendable.

When he finally did get through to his agent she was only perfunctorily apologetic. "*Mi scusi,*" Jeftha said. "I had a hard night." That was all the explanation she offered, but her dark and youthful face supported it. The skin was as unlined as always, but her eyes were red. "Acrobats," she said, wearily running one hand through her thick hedge of hair.

"You shouldn't sleep with your clients," Rafiel said, setting aside the historical fact that she had, on occasion, with himself. "Now, this woman Hillaree. . . ."

When Jeftha heard about the dramaturge's surprise visit she was furious. "The *puta!*" she snapped. "Going behind your agent's *back?* She'll never cast a client of mine again—but how could you, Rafiel? If Mosay finds out you've been dealing with a tuppenny tinhorn like Hillaree he'll go berserker!"

"I wasn't *dealing* with her," Rafiel began, but she cut him off.

"Pray he doesn't hear about it. He's in a bad enough mood already. When he got to look at his locations somebody told him that the Thebes he was trying to match was the wrong Thebes—two of them with the same name, Rafiel, can you imagine that? How stupid can they be? The Thebes in Egypt didn't count. The Thebes somewhere north of Athens was the one where Oedipus had been king, and it was an entirely different kind of territory."

"He's back?"

"He will be in the morning," she confirmed. "Now, was that what you were so *fou* to talk to me about?"

He hesitated, and then said, "Forget it now, anyway." Because he couldn't quite bring himself to ask her the question that was mostly on his mind, which was whether it was at all possible that Docilia's hints and implications could possibly be right.

8

The work of a dramaturge does not end with making sure a production is successfully performed. A major part of the job is making sure the audiences will want to spend their money to see it. In the furtherance of this endeavor, sweet are the uses of publicity; for which reason Mosay has

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arranged to do his first costumed rehearsals in a very conspicuous place. The place he has chosen is the public park on the roof of the arcology, where there are plenty of loungers and strollers, and every one a sure word-of-mouth broadcaster when they get home. Nor has Mosay failed to alert the paparazzi to be present in force.

Rafiel thought seriously of taking the kitten with him to show off at the day's rehearsal—after all, who else in the troupe owned a live cat? But the park was half a kilometer square, with a lake and a woodsy area and sweet little gardens all around. There was even a boxwood maze, great for children to play in, but all too good a place for a little kitten to get lost in, he decided, and regretfully left it in the care of his server.

The trouble with the rooftop was that it was windy. They were nearly a kilometer above the ground, where the air was always blowing strong. Clever vanes deflected the worst of the gusts, but not all of them; Rafiel felt chilled and wished Mosay had chosen another workplace. Or that, at least, they hadn't been instructed to show up in costume: there wasn't much warmth in the short woolen tunic. The winds were stronger than usual that day, and there were thick black clouds rolling toward them over the arcologies to the west. Rafiel listened: had he heard the sound of distant thunder? Or just the wind?

He shivered and joined the other performers as they walked around to get used to their costumes. Although the rooftop was the common property of all the hundred and sixty-odd thousand people who lived or worked in that particular arcology, Mosay had managed to persuade the arcology council to set one grassy sward aside for rehearsals. The council didn't object. They agreed that it would be a pleasing sort of entertainment for the tenants, and anyway Mosay was a first-rate persuader—after all, what other thing did a dramaturge really have to be?

The proof of his persuasive powers was that, astonishingly, everyone in the cast was there, and on time: Mosay himself, back from his fruitless quest but looking fresh and undaunted, and Victorium, and Charlus, the choreographer—no, *assistant* choreographer, Rafiel corrected himself resolutely—and all the eleven principal performers in the show and the dozen members of the chorus. Rafiel had practiced with the sandals and the sword in his condo, while the watching kitten purred approvingly; by now he was easy enough in the costume. Not Andrev, the Creon, who kept getting his sword caught between his knees. There weren't any costume problems for Sander, the Tiresias, since his costume was only a long featureless smock, and Sander, who was a tall, unkempt man with seal-colored hair that straggled down over his shoulders, wore the thing as though he was ignoring it, which was pretty much the way he wore all his clothes anyway. All the women wore simple white gowns, Docilia's Jocasta with flowers in her hair, the daughters unembellished.

But when Rafiel first saw Bruta, the Antigone, turn toward him his heart stopped for a moment, she was so like Alegretta. "*Che cosa,* Rafiel?" she asked in sudden worry at his expression, but he only shook his head.

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He kept watching her, though. Apart from the chance resemblance to his life's lost love, Bruta struck him as a bit of puzzle. Bruta looked neither younger nor older than anyone else in the cast, of course—Rafiel himself always excepted—but it was obvious that she was a lot less experienced. That interested Rafiel. Mosay was not the kind who liked to bother with newcomers. He left the discovery of fresh talent to lesser dramaturges; he could afford to hire the best, who inevitably were also the ones who had long since made their reputations. Rafiel thought of asking Docilia, who would be sure to know everyone's reasons for everything they did, but there wasn't time. Mosay was already waving everyone to cluster around him.

"Company," said Mosay commandingly. "I'm glad to be back, but we've got a lot of work to do, so if I may have your attention?" He got it and said sunnily, "I do have one announcement before we begin. I've found our shooting location. *Wunderbar,* it has an existing set that we can use—oh, not *exactly* replicating old Thebes, in a technical sense, but close enough. And we'd better get on with it, so *if* you please. . . ." Rafiel concealed a grin at the way Mosay was making sure he looked every centimeter the staging genius as he played to the spectators behind the velvet ropes, and, of course, to the pointing cameras of the paparazzi. When he had everyone's attention he went on. "We aren't going to do the short fighting-the-Sphinx scene because we don't have a sphinx" —well, of course they didn't; there never would be a sphinx until the animation people put one in—"so we'll start with the *pas de quatre,* where you kids"—nodding to the four "children" of Oedipus and Jocasta—"sing your little song about how after Oedipus saved Thebes from the Sphinx he married your *maman,* the widowed Jocasta, whose husband had been mysteriously murdered and thus Oedipus became *koenig* himself—"

"Oh, hell, Mosay," said Docilia warmly, "that's a whole play right there. *Bisogniamo* say all that?"

"We must. We'll get it in, and anyway that's not your problem, Docilia, is it? In fact, you're not even in this scene, or the next scene either, except to stand around and look pretty, because this is where Creon makes his entrance and tells Oedipus what the oracle of Apollo said."

"I already know all the Creon lines," Andrev said proudly. He had the reputation of being a slow study.

"I certainly hope so, Andrev. Places, everybody? And now if we'll just take it from the last bars of Victorium's opening. . . ."

It wasn't a big scene for Rafiel. He didn't even get to make a real entrance, just ambled onstage to wait for Creon to show up. The scene belonged to the Creon. Victorium had written the music accordingly, with a background score full of dark and mystical dissonances—right enough for an oracle's pronouncements, Rafiel supposed.

What Creon brought was bad news, so Rafiel's responses had to be

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equally somber. Not just somber, though. Rafiel made sure all his gestures were, well, a trifle less *portentous* than the Creon's—after all, Rafiel was not merely playing an old, doomed Theban king, he was playing *himself* playing the king. That was what being a star was all about.

Rafiel flinched at a boom from the sky. Thunder was crashing somewhere in the distance, and Mosay agitatedly demanded of a watching arcology worker that they erect the dome. Just in time; rain was slashing down on the big transparent hood over the roof before the petaled sections had quite closed over them. Rafiel shuddered again. He found that he was feeling quite tired. He wondered if it was showing up in his performance . . . though of course it was only a dress rehearsal.

All the same, Rafiel didn't like the feeling that his dancing was not as lively—as bumptiously clumsy—as his audiences expected of him. He forced himself into the emotions of the part—easily enough, because Rafiel had all the ambiguity of any actor in his beliefs. Whatever he privately thought or felt, he could throw himself into the thoughts and feelings of the character he was playing; and if that character took silly oracular conundrums seriously, then for the duration of that role so would Rafiel. He worked so hard at it that at the end of the third run-through he was sweating as he finished his meditative *pas de seul.* So was the Creon, although he had no dancing to do. But it was Rafiel Mosay was watching, with a peculiar expression of concern on his face, and it was Rafiel he was looking at when he declared a twenty-minute break.

"*Comment ça va?*" Docilia asked, taking Rafiel's elbow.

He blinked at her. "Fine, fine," he assured her, though he didn't think he really was. Was it that obvious? He hadn't missed Mosay's watchful eyes, though now the dramaturge had forgotten him in the press of making quick calls on the communications monitor at the edge of the meadow. Rafiel made an effort and pressed Docilia's arm against his side amatively—well, maybe there was his problem right there, he thought. Deprivation. After all, why should any healthy person deliberately stop having sex, thus very possibly endangering not only his performance, but even his health?

"You don't *look* all right," Docilia told him, steering him through the park to a formal garden. "Except when you're looking at that Bruta."

"Oh, now really," Rafiel laughed—actually laughing, because the thought really amused him. "She's just so *young*."

"So amateurish, you mean."

"That too," he acknowledged, slipping his arm around her waist in a friendly way. "I'm surprised Mosay took her on."

"You don't know?"

"Know what?" Rafiel asked, proving that he did not.

"She's his latest daughter," Docilia informed him with pleasure. "So if you're shtupping her you're going to be part of the family."

Rafiel opened his mouth to deny that he was making love to Bruta, or indeed to anyone else since the last time with Docilia herself, but he

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closed it again. That, after all, was none of Docilia's business, not to mention that it did not comport well with the image of a lusty, healthy, *youthful* idol of every audience.

But she might have been reading his mind. "Oh, poor Rafiel," she said, tightening her grip on his waist. "You're just not getting enough, are you?" She looked around. There was hardly anyone near them, the casual spectators mostly still watching the performers in the rehearsal area. And they were near the maze.

"I have an idea," she murmured. "Can we go in the maze for a while?"

After all, why not? Rafiel surrendered. "I'd like nothing better," he said gallantly, knowing as well as she did that the best thing one did in the isolation of a maze was to do a little friendly fooling around with one's companion—on whom, in any case, Rafiel was beginning to feel he might as well be beginning to have sexual designs again, after all. They had no trouble finding a quiet dead end and, without discussion, Rafiel unhesitatingly put his hand on her.

"Are you sure you aren't too tired?" she asked, but turning toward him as she spoke; and, of course, that imposed on him the duty to prove that he wasn't tired at all. He realized he didn't have much time to demonstrate it in, so they wasted none. They were horizontal on the warm, grassy ground in a minute.

It was strange, he reflected, pumping away, that something you wanted to do could also be a wearisome chore. He was glad enough when they had finished. . . . And almost at that very moment, as though taking a quick cue, a voice from an unseen person, somewhere else in the maze, was thundering at them.

It was Mosay's voice. What he was saying—bawling—was: "Rafiel! Is that you I hear in there with Docilia? Come out this minute! We need to talk."

Rafiel was breathing hard, but he managed to grin at his partner and help her to her feet. "Can't it wait, Mosay?" he called, carefully conserving his breath.

"It can *not*," the dramaturge roared. "*Expliquez* yourself. Who's this woman who's claiming she's got you signed up for a new production?"

Rafiel groaned. Mosay had in fact found out. Docilia put an alarmed hand on his forearm.

"Oh, *paura*. You'd better pull yourself together," she whispered, doing the same for herself. "He's really *furioso* about something."

Rafiel gave in, tugging his underpants back on. "Well," he called to the featureless hedge, "we did talk a little bit, she and I—"

"She says you *agreed!*" snapped the invisible Mosay. "She's got a story about it in all the media, and I won't have it! Rafiel, you're making me look like a *dummkopf*."

"I never actually agreed—"

"But you didn't say no, either, did you? That's not *cosi buono*. I won't have you making *any* commitments after this one," Mosay roared. "Now *vieni qui* and talk to me!"

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His muttering died in the distance. Docilia turned to look into Rafiel's face. "What in the world have you done?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said positively, and then, thinking it over, "But I guess enough." He could have thrown the woman out of his home without any discussion at all, he thought. He hadn't. Resigned, he braced himself for the vituperation that was sure to come.

It came, all right, but not as pure vituperation. Mosay had switched to another mode. "Oh, *pauvre petit* Rafiel," he said sorrowfully, "haven't I always done everything I can for you? And now you're conspiring behind my back with some sleazeball for a cheap-and-dirty exploitation show?"

"It isn't really that cheap, Mosay, it's a hundred mil—"

"Cheap isn't just *money,* Rafiel. Cheap is cheap. Second-raters. Do you want to wind up your career with the has-beens and never-wases? No, Rafiel," he said, shaking his head, "*Non credo* you want that. And, anyway, I've talked to your agent, and Jeftha says the deal's already *kaput.*" He allowed himself a forgiving smile, then turned away briskly.

"Now let's get some work done here, company," he called, clapping his hands. "One more time, from Creon's story about the oracle. . . ."

But they didn't actually get that far, and it was Rafiel's fault.

Rafiel started out well enough, rising in wrath to sing his attack on Creon's message from the oracle. Then something funny happened. Rafiel felt the ground sliding away underneath him. He didn't feel the impact of his head on the grassy lawn. He didn't know he had lost consciousness. He was only aware of beginning to come to, half dazed, as someone was—someones were—loading him on to a high-wheeled cart and hurrying him to an elevator, and walking beside him were people who were agitatedly talking about him as though he couldn't hear.

"You'll have to tell him, Mosay," said Docilia's voice, fuzzily registering in Rafiel's ears.

Then there was a mumble, of which all Rafiel could distinguish was when, at the end, someone raised his voice to say, "*Pas* me!"

"*Allora* who?" in Docilia's voice again, and a longer mumble mumble, and then once more Docilia: "I think it'd be better from *la donna* . . . "

And then he felt the quick chill spray of an anesthetic on the side of his neck. Rafiel fell asleep as the shot did its job. Deeply asleep. So deep that there was no need to worry about anything . . . and no desire to wonder just what it was that his friends had been talking about.

"Just fatigue," the doctor said reassuringly when Rafiel was conscious again. "You collapsed. *Probabilmente* you've just been working too hard."

"Probably?" Rafiel asked, challenging the woman, but she only shrugged.

"You're just as good as you were when you left here, basically," she said. "Your *ami*'s here to take you home."

The *ami* was Mosay, full of concern and sweetness. Rafiel was glad to see him.

"I'm sorry about being so silly, but I'll be ready to get back to work in

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the morning," Rafiel promised, leaning on the hard, strong form of the nurser.

"*Sans doute* you will," Mosay said worriedly. "Here, sit in the *chaise,* let the nurser give you a ride to the cars." And at the elevator, taking over the wheelchair himself: "Still," he added, "if you're at all tired, why shouldn't you take another day or two to rest? I've picked a location spot in Texas. . . ."

That roused Rafiel. "Texas? *Pas* Turkey?"

"Of course not Turkey," Mosay said severely. "There's just the right place out in the desert, hardly built up at all. Now, here we are at your place, and they've got your nice bed all ready for you—*gesu cristo!*" he interrupted himself, staring. "What's that?"

Weak as he was, Rafiel laughed out loud. His server was coming toward him welcomingly, and padding regally after, tail stiff in the air, was the kitten.

"It's just my cat, Mosay. A present from a friend."

"Does it bite?" When reassured, the dramaturge gave it a hostile look anyway, as though suspecting an attack or, worse, an excretion. "If that's what you like, Rafiel, why should I criticize? Anyway, I'll leave you now. You can join us when you're ready. We'll work around you for a bit. No, don't argue, it's no trouble. Just give me your word that you won't come out until you're *absolutely* ready. . . "

"I promise," said Rafiel, wondering why it felt so good to be undertaking to do nothing for a while. It never had before.

9

Rafiel, who loves to travel, seldom has time to do much of it. That seems a bit strange, since he is a famous presence in all the places where human beings live, on planet and off, but of course his presence in almost all of those places is only electronic. He is looking forward eagerly to the ride in the magnetrain, with no one for company but the little white kitten. When he finally embarks, after the obligate few days of loafing around his condo, it really is as great a pleasure for him as he had hoped—well, would have been, anyway, if he weren't continuing to be so unreasonably tired. *Still he enjoys watching the scenery flash by at six hundred kilometers an hour—arcologies, fields, woods, rivers—and he enjoys doing nothing. He especially enjoys being alone. With his presence on the train unknown to the fans who might otherwise besiege him, with only the servers to bring his meals and make up his bed and tend to the kitten, he thinks he almost would not mind if the trip went on for ever. When they reach their destination at the edge of the Sonora Desert he is reluctant to get off.*

Rafiel arrived at the Sonora arcology just in time to catch a few hours' sleep in a rented condo, not nearly as nice as his own, in an arcology an

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order of magnitude tinier. When he reported for work in the morning even Turkey began to seem more desirable. This desert was *hot.*

Mosay was there to greet him solicitously—proudly, too, as he waved around the set he had discovered. *"Wunderbar,* isn't it? And such *bonne chance* it was available. Of course, it's not an *exact* copy of the actual old Thebes, but I think it's quite *interessante,* don't you? And there's no sense casting great talents, is there, if you're going to ask them to play in front of a background of dried mud huts."

Wilting in the heat, Rafiel gazed around at Mosay's idea of an "interesting" Thebes. He was pretty sure that Thebes-in-Sonora didn't much resemble the old Thebes-in-Boeotia. So much marble! So much artfully concealed lighting inside the buildings—did the Greeks have artificial lighting at all? Would the Greeks have put that heroic-seized statue of Oedipus (actually, of Rafiel himself in his Oedipus suit) in the central courtyard? And, if they had, would they have surrounded it with banked white and yellow roses? Did they have *moats* around their castles? Well, did they have castles at all? Questions like that took Rafiel's mind off the merciless sun, but not enough.

"It's you and Docilia now, please," Mosay said—commanded, really. "Places!" And on cue Docilia began Jocasta's complaint about childbirth. Rafiel reacted as the part called for as, shoulders swaying, head accusingly erect, she sang:

> *Che sapete,* husband? I did all the borning,
> Carrying those devils and puking every morning.
> Never *peine* so *dur,* never agony so hot,
> It was like pushing a pumpkin through—

"No, no, cut," Mosay shouted. "Oh, Rafiel! What do you think you're doing there, taking a little nap? Your wife's giving you hell about the kids she's borne for you and you're gaping around like some kind of *turista.* Get a little movement into it, will you?"

"Sorry," Rafiel said, as the cast relaxed. He saw Charlus coming, deferentially but with determination, toward him, as he turned his face to the server that came over to mop the sweat off his brow. There wasn't much of it, in spite of the heat; in the dry desert air it evaporated almost as fast as it formed.

"Do you mind, Rafiel?" Charlus offered, almost begging. "I was just thinking, you might want to wring your turn out and let the arms go all the way through when she starts the 'puking every morning' line."

"I didn't want to upstage her."

"No, of course not, but Mosay's got this idea that you have to be *interacting,* you see, and—"

"Sure," Rafiel said. "Let's get on with it." And he was able to keep his mind on his work, in spite of the heat, in spite of the fatigue, for nearly another hour. But by the time Mosay called a break for lunch he was feeling dizzy.

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Instantly the sexy young Bruta was at his side. "Let me keep you company," she said, almost purring as she guided him to a seat in the shade. "What would you like? I'll bring you a plate."

"I'm not really hungry," he said, with utter truth. He didn't think he would ever be hungry again.

Bruta was all sympathy. "No, of course not. It is dreadfully hot, isn't it? But maybe just a plate of ice cream—do you like palmfruit?" He gave in, and watched her go for it with objective admiration. The girl was slim as an eel, with a tiny bum that any man would enjoy getting his hands on. But it was only objectively that the thought was interesting; nothing stirred in his groin, no pictures of an interesting figure developed in the crystal ball of his mind. Only—

His mouth was filling with thin, warm saliva.

It could not be possible that he was about to vomit, he thought, and then realized it was quite possible, in fact. He got briskly to his feet, prepared to give a close-lipped smile to anyone who was looking at him. No one was. He turned away from the direction of the buffet table, heading out into the desert. As he got behind Oedipus's castle he picked up his pace, pressing his palm of his hand against his involuntarily opening mouth, but he couldn't hold it. He bent forward and spewed a cupful of thin, colorless fluid on to the thirsty stand.

It wasn't painful to vomit. It was almost a pleasure, it happened so easily and quickly, and when it was over he felt quite a lot better—though puzzled, for he hadn't eaten enough that morning to have enough in his stomach to be worth vomiting.

He turned to see if any of the troupe had been looking in his direction. Apparently no human had, but a server was hurrying toward him across the desert. "Sir?" Its voice was humble but determined. "Sir, do you need assistance here?"

"No. *Hsieh-hsieh,*" Rafiel added, remembering to be courteous as ever, even to machines.

"I must tell you that there is some risk to your safety here," the server informed him. "We have destroyed or removed fourteen small reptiles and other animals this morning, but others may come in. They are attracted by the presence of warm-blooded people. Please be careful where you step."

Rafiel almost forgot his distress, charmed by the interesting idea. "You mean rattlesnakes? I've heard of 'rattlesnakes.' They can bite a person and kill him."

"Oh, hardly kill one, sir, since we are equipped for quick medical attention. But it would be a painful experience, so if you don't mind rejoining the others. . . ."

And it paced him watchfully, all the way back.

It didn't seem that anyone had noticed, though Bruta was standing there with a tray in her hand. "Nothing to eat after all, please," Rafiel begged her. "It's just too hot."

"Whatever you say, Rafiel," she said submissively. But she stayed

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attentively by him all through the break, watchful as any serving machine. And when they started again, he saw the girl reporting to her father, and felt Mosay's eyes studying him.

He managed to keep his mind on what he was doing for that shot, and for the next. It was, he thought, a creditable enough performance, but it wasn't easy. They were shooting out of sequence, to take advantage of the lighting as the sun moved and for grouping the actors conveniently. Rafiel found that confusing. Worse, he discovered that he was feeling strangely detached. Docilia did not seem to be the Docilia he had so often bedded any more. She had become her role; Jocasta, the mother of his children and appallingly also of himself. When he reached the scene where he confronted her dead body, twisting as it hung in the throneroom, he felt an unconquerable need for reassurance. Without thinking, he reached out and touched her to make sure she was still warm.

"Oh, *merde,* Rafiel," she sighed, opening her eyes to stare at him, "what are you doing? You've wrecked the whole *drecklich* shot."

But Mosay was there already, soothing, a little apprehensive. "It's all right, Rafiel," he said. "I know this is hard on you, the first day's shooting, and all this heat. It's about time to quit for the day, anyway."

Rafiel nodded. "It'll be better in the morning," he promised.

But it wasn't.

It wasn't better the next day, or the day after that, or the day after that one. It didn't get better at all. "It's the heat, of course," Docilia told him, watching Charlus trying to perfect the chorus in their last appearance. ("Deeper *plié,* for God's sake—*use* your legs!"). "Imagine Mosay making us work in the *open,* for God's sake."

"Of course," Rafiel agreed. He had stopped trying to look as though he were all right when he was off camera. He just stood in the shade, with an air cooler blowing on him. And Charlus said the same thing.

"You'll be all right when we finish here," he promised, watching Bruta and the Ismene. "It's only another day or two—no, no! *Chassé* back now! Then a *pas de chat,* but throw your legs back and come down on the right foot—that's better. Don't you want to lie down, Rafiel?"

He did want that, of course. He wanted it a lot, but not enough to be seen doing it on the set. He did all his lying down when shooting was over for the day, back in the borrowed condo, where he slept almost all the free time he had, with the kitten curled up at his feet.

Even Docilia was mothering him, coming to tuck him in at night but making it clear that she was not intending, or even willing, to stay. She kissed him on the forehead and hesitated, looking at the purring kitten. "You got that from Alegretta, didn't you? *Permesso* ask you something?" And when he nodded, "No offense, Rafiel, but why are you so *verrückt* for this particular one?"

"You mean Alegretta? I don't know," he said, after thought. "*Forse* it's

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just because she's so different from us. She doesn't even talk like us. She's—serious."

"Oh, Rafiel! Aren't we serious? We work *hard*."

"Well, sure we do, but it's just—well—you know, we're just sort of making shadow pictures on a screen. Maybe it comes to what she's serious *about*," he offered. "You know, she started a whole new life for herself—quit medicine, took up science. . . ."

Docilia sniffed. "That's not so unusual. I could do that if I wanted to. Some day I probably will."

Rafiel smiled up at her, imagining this pale, tiny beauty becoming a scientist. "When?" he asked.

"What does it matter when? I've got plenty of time!"

And Rafiel fell asleep thinking about what "plenty of time" meant. It meant, among other things, that when you had forever to get around to *important* things, it gave you a good reason to postpone them—forever.

The shooting went faster than Rafiel had imagined, and suddenly they were at an end to it. As he waited in full make-up for his last scene, his face a ruin, himself unable to see through the wreck the make-up people had made of his eyes, Docilia came over. "You've been wonderful," she told him lovingly. "I'm glad it's over, though. I promise you I won't be sorry to leave here."

Rafiel nodded and said, more wistfully than not, "Still it's kind of nice to have a little solitude sometimes."

She gave him a perplexed look. "Solitude," she said, as though she'd never head the word before.

Then Mosay was calling for him on the set . . . and then, before he had expected it, his part was done. Old Oedipus, blinded and helpless, was cast out of the city where he had reigned, and all that was left for the cast to shoot was the little come-on Mosay had prepared for the audiences, when the children and chorus got together to set up the sequel.

They didn't need Rafiel for that, but he lingered to watch, sweltering or not. A part of him was glad the ordeal was over. Another part was somberly wondering what would happen next in his life. Back to the hospital for more tinkering, most likely, he thought, but there was no pleasure in that. He decided not to think about it and watched the shooting of the final scene. One after another the minor actors were telling the audience they hoped they'd liked the show, and then, all together:

If so, we'll sure do more of these
Jazzy old soaps by Mr. Sophocles.

And that was it. They left the servers to strike the set. They got on the blessedly cool cast bus that took them back to the condo. Everyone was chattering, getting ready for the farewells. And Mosay came stumbling down the aisle to Rafiel, holding on to the seats. He leaned over,

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looking at Rafiel carefully. "Docilia says you wanted to stay here for a bit," he said.

That made Rafiel blink. What had she told him that for? "Well, I only said I kind of liked being alone here. . . ."

The dramaturge was shaking his head masterfully. "No, no. It's quite all right, there's nothing left but the technical stuff. I insist. You stay here. Rest. Take a few days here. I think you'll agree it's worth it, and —and—anyway, *ese,* after all, there's no real reason why you have to go back with us, is there?"

And, on thinking it over, Rafiel realized that there actually wasn't.

The trouble was that there wasn't any real reason to stay in the Sonora arcology, either. As far as Rafiel could see, there wasn't any reason for him to be anywhere at all, because—for the first time in how long?—he didn't have anything he had to do.

Since he'd had no practice at doing nothing, he made up things to do. He called people on the tel screen. Called old acquaintances—all of them proving to be kind, and solicitous, and quite unprecedently remote —called colleagues, even called a few paparazzi, though only to thank them for things they had already publicized for him and smilingly secretive about any future plans.

Future plans reminded him to call his agent. Jeftha, at least, seemed to feel no particular need to be kind. "I had the idea you were pretty sick," she said, studying him with care, and no more than half accepting his protestations that he was actually entirely well and ready for more work quite soon.

She shook her head at that. "I've called off all your appearances," she said. "Let them get hungry, then when you're ready to get back—"

"I'm ready now!"

The black and usually cheerful face froze. "No," she said.

It was the first time his agent had ever said a flat "no" to her best client. "Ay Jesus," he said, getting angry, "who the hell do you think you're talking to? I don't need *you.*"

The expression on Jeftha's face became contrite. "I know you don't, *caro mio,* but I need you. I need you to be well. I—care about you, dear Rafiel."

That stopped the flooding anger in its tracks. He studied her suspiciously but, almost for the first time, she seemed to be entirely sincere. It was not a quality he had associated with agents.

"Anyway," she went on, the tone becoming more the one he was used to, "I can't let you make deals by yourself, *piccina.* You'll get involved with people like that stupid Hillaree and her dumb story ideas. Who wants to hear about *real* things like kosmojets going off to other stars? People don't care about *now.* They want the good old stories with lots of pain and torture and *dying*—excuse me, *carissimo,*" she finished, flushing.

But she was right. Rafiel thought that he really ought to think about

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that: was that the true function of art, to provide suffering for people who were incapable of having any?

He probably would think seriously about that, he decided, but not just yet. So he did very little. He made his calls, and between calls he dozed, and loafed, and pulled a string across the carpeted floor to amuse the kitten, and now and then remembered to eat.

He began to think about an almost forgotten word that kept popping up in his mind. The word was "retirement."

It was a strange concept. He had never known anyone who had "retired."

Still, he knew that people used to do it in the old days. It might be an interesting novelty. There was no practical obstacle in the way; he had long since accumulated all the money he could possibly need to last him out . . . for whatever time he had left to live. (After all, it wasn't as though he were going to live forever). Immortals had to worry about eternities, yes, but the cold fact was that no untreated human lasted much more than a hundred and twenty years, and Rafiel had already used up ninety of them.

He could even, he mused, be *like* an immortal in these declining years of his life. Just like an immortal, he could, if he liked, make a midcourse change.

He could take up a new career and thus change what remained of his life entirely. He could be a writer, maybe; he was quite confident that any decent performer could do *that*. Or he could be a politician. Certainly enough people knew the name of the famous Rafiel to give him an edge over almost any other candidate for almost any office. In short, there was absolutely nothing to prevent him from trying something completely different with the rest of his life. He might fail at whatever he tried, of course. But what difference did that make, when he would be dead in a couple of decades anyway?

When the doorwarden rang he was annoyed at the interruption, since his train of thought had been getting interesting. He lifted his head in anger to the machine. "*Ho detto* positively no calls!"

The doorwarden was unperturbed. "There is always an exception," it informed him, right out of its basic programming, "in the case of visitors with special urgency, and I am informed this is one. The woman says she is from *Hakluyt* and she states that she is certain you will wish to see her."

"*Hakluyt?* Is it that *fou* dramaturge woman again? Well, she's wrong about that, I don't want to talk about her stupid show—"

But then the voice from the speaker changed. It wasn't the doorwarden's any more. It was a human voice, and a familiar, female human voice at that. "Rafiel," she said fondly, "what is this crap about a show? It's me, Alegretta. I came to visit you all the way from my ship *Hakluyt*, and I don't know anything about any stupid shows. Won't you please tell your doorwarden to let me in?"

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10

Rafiel knows that Alegretta has come from somewhere near Mars, and he knows pretty well how far away Mars is from the Earth: many millions of kilometers. He knows how long even a steady-thrust spacecraft takes to cross that immense void between planets, and then how long it takes for a passenger to descend to a spaceport and get to this remote outpost on the edge of the Sonoran desert. And he is well able to count back the days and see that Alegretta must have started this trip to his side—at the very least—ten days or two weeks before, which is to say right around the time when he collapsed into the hospital back in Indiana. He knows all that, and understands its unpleasing implications. He just doesn't want to think about any of those implications at that moment.

When you have lost the love of your life and suddenly, without warning, she appears in it again, what do you do?

First, of course, there is kissing, and *It's been so long*s, and *How good it is to see you*s and of course Alegretta has to see how well the kitten she sent is doing, and Rafiel has to admire the fat white cat Alegretta has brought with her, a server carrying it for her in a great screened box (it has turned out to be the kitten's mother), and of course Rafiel has to offer food and drink, and Alegretta has to accept something . . . but then what? What—after half a century or more—do you *say* to each other? What Rafiel said, watching his love nibble on biscuits and monkey-orange and beer, was only, "I didn't expect you here."

"Well, I had to come," she said, diffident, smiling, stroking the snow-white cat that lay like a puddle in her lap, "because Nicolette here kept rubbing up against me to tell me that she really missed her baby kitten—and because, oh, Rafiel, I've been so damn much missing *you*." Which of course led to more kissing over the table, and while the server was cleaning up the beer that had got spilled in the process, Rafiel sank back to study her. She hadn't changed. The hair was a darker red now, but it was still Alegretta's unruly curly-mop hair, and the face and the body that went with the hair were not one hour older than they had been—sixty? seventy? however many years it had been since they last touched like this. Rafiel felt his heart trembling in his chest and said quickly, "What were you saying about *Hakluyt?*"

"My ship. Yes."

"You're going on that *ship?*"

"Of course I am, dear." And it turned out that she was, though such a thing had never occurred to him when he was talking to the dramaturge woman. There definitely was a *Hakluyt* habitat, and it really was, even now, being fitted with lukewarm-fusion drives and a whole congeries of pion generators that were there to produce the muons that would make the fusion reactor react.

"You know all this nuclear fusion stuff?" Rafiel asked, marvelling.

"Certainly I do. I'm the head engineer on the ship, Rafiel," she said

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with pride, "and I'm afraid that means I can't stay here long. They're installing the drive engines right now, and I must be there before they finish."

He shook his head. "So now you've become a particle physicist."

"Well, an engineer, anyway. Why not? You get tired of one thing, after you've done it for ninety or a hundred years. I just didn't want to be a doctor any more; when things go right it's boring, and when they don't—"

She stopped, biting her lip, as though there were something she wanted to say. Rafiel headed her off. "But what will you find when you get to this distant what's-its-name star?"

"It's called Tau Ceti."

"This Tau Ceti. What do you expect? Will people be able to live there?"

She thought about that. "Well, yes, certainly they will—in the habitat, if nothing else. The habitat doesn't care what star it orbits. We do know there are planets there, too. We don't know, really, if any of them has life. . . ."

"But you're going anyway?"

"What else is there to do?" she asked, and he laughed.

"You haven't changed a bit," he said fondly.

"Of course not. Why should I?" She sounded almost angry—perhaps at Rafiel because, after all, he had. He shook his head, reached for her with loving hunger, and pulled her to him.

Of course they made love, with the cat and the kitten watching interestedly from the chaise longue at the side of the room. Then they slept a while, or Alegretta did, because she was still tired from the long trip. Remarkably, Rafiel was not in the least tired. He watched over her tenderly, allowing himself to be happy in spite of the fact that he knew why she was there. She didn't sleep long, and woke smiling up at him. "I'm sorry, Rafiel," she said.

"What have you got to be sorry for?"

"I'm sorry I stayed away so long. I was afraid, you see." She sat up, naked. "I didn't know if I could handle seeing you, well, grow old."

Rafiel felt embarrassment. "It isn't pretty, I suppose."

"It's frightening," she said honestly. "I think you're the main reason I gave up medicine."

"It's all right," he said, soothing. "Anyway, I'm sure what you're doing now is more interesting. Going to another *star*! It takes a lot of courage, that."

"It takes a lot of hard work." Then she admitted, "It takes courage, too. It certainly took me a long time to make up my mind to do it. Sometimes I still wonder if I have the nerve to go through with it. We'll be thirty-five years en route, Rafiel. Nearly five thousand people, all packed together for that long."

He frowned. "I thought somebody said the *Hakluyt* was supposed to have twenty thousand to start."

"We were. We are. But there aren't that many volunteers for the trip,

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you see. That's why they made me chief engineer; the other experts didn't see any reason to leave the solar system, when they were doing so many interesting things here." She leaned forward to kiss him. "Do you know what my work is, Rafiel? Do you know anything about lukewarm-fusion?"

"Well," he began, and then honestly finished: "No."

She looked astonished, or perhaps it was just pitying. "But there are powerplants in every arcology. Haven't you ever visited one?" She didn't wait for an answer but began to tell him about her work, and how long she had had to study to master the engineering details. And in his turn he told her about his life as a star, with the personal appearances and the fans always showing up, wherever he went, with their love and excitement; and about the production of *Oedipus* they had just finished, and the members of the troupe. Alegretta was fascinated by the inside glimpse of the lives of the famous. Then, when he got to the point of telling her about Docilia and her decision to try monogamy with the father of her child, as soon as the child was born, anyway, Alegretta began to purse her lips again. She got up to stare out the window.

He called, "Is something wrong?"

She was silent for a moment, then turned to him seriously. "Rafiel, dear," she said. "There's something I have to tell you."

"I know," he said reluctantly.

"No, I don't think you do. I didn't come here by accident. Mosay—"

He was beside her by then, and closed her lips with a kiss. "But I do know," he said. "Mosay called you to tell you, didn't he? Why else would you come all the way back to Earth in such a great hurry? That little episode I had, it wasn't just fatigue, was it? It meant that they can't keep me going much longer, so the bad news is that I don't have much time left, do I? I'm going to die."

"Oh, Rafiel," she said, woebegone.

"But I've known that this was going to happen all my life," he said reasonably, "or at least since you told me. It's all right."

"It *isn't!*"

He shrugged, almost annoyed. "It has to be all right, because I'm mortal," he explained.

She was shaking her head. "Yes. But no." She seemed almost near tears as she plunged on. "Don't you see, that's why I came here like this. You don't have to die *completely*. There's a kind of immortality that even short-timers have open to them if they want it. Like your Docilia."

He frowned at her, and she reached out and touched his lips. "Will you give me a baby?" she whispered. "A son? A boy who will look just like you when he grows up—around Tau Ceti?"

11

Although the Sonora arcology is far tinier and dingier than some of

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those in the busy, crowded north, it naturally does not lack any of the standard facilities—including a clinic for implanting a human fetus into a nurturing animal womb. On the fourth day after the donation the new parents (or, usually, at least one of them) may come up to the sunny, brightly painted nursery to receive their fetus. It is true that the circumstances for Rafiel and Alegretta are a bit unusual. Most fetuses are implanted at once into the large mammal—a cow most often, or a large sow—that will bring them to term and deliver them. Their child has a more complicated incubation in store. He (it is definitely to be a boy, and they have spent a lot of time thinking of names for him) must go with Alegretta to the interstellar ship Hakluyt, *which means that the baby's host must go there too. Cows are not really very portable. So, just for now, for the sake of ease in transportation, their fetus has been temporarily implanted in a much smaller mammal, which is now spending as much time as it is allowed sitting purring in Alegretta's lap, a bit ruffled at recent indignities, but quite content.*

They didn't just talk and make love and babies. On the second day Alegretta announced she was temporarily going to be a doctor again.

"But you've probably forgotten how to do it," Rafiel said, half joking.

"The computer hasn't," she told him, not joking at all. She got his medical records from the datafile and studied them seriously for a long time. Then she sent the server out for some odds and ends. When they came she pressed sticky sensor buttons on his chest and belly—"I hope I remember how to do this without pulling all your hair off," she said—and pored over the readings on the screen. Then she had long conversations over the tel with someone, from which Rafiel was excluded and which wound up in the server bringing him new little bottles of spansules and syrups to take. "These will make you feel better," she told him.

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But they both knew that even the best efforts of loving Alegretta could not possibly make him *be* better.

They were also both well aware that they could not stay long together in Sonora. If they hadn't known that, they would have been told so, because the callback lists kept piling up on the communications screen—Mosay and Jeftha and ten or twelve others for Rafiel, faxed messages from *Hakluyt* for Alegretta. Once a day they took time to read them, and occasionally to answer them. "They're putting the frozen stocks on board now," Alegretta announced to her lover, between callbacks.

"Frozen food for the trip? You must need a lot—"

"No, no. Not food—well, a little bit of frozen food, yes, but we couldn't carry enough to last out the trip. Most of the food we need we'll grow along the way. What I'm talking about is frozen sperm and ova—cats, dogs, livestock, birds—and frozen seeds and clones for planting. We'll need them when we get there."

"And what *if* there's no good planet there to plant them on?" he asked.

"Bite your tongue," she said absently, making him smile at her as she sat huddled over the manifest. He found himself smiling a good deal these days. His kitten, which had not let either of them out of its sight while its mother was off in the implantation clinic, was licking its left forepaw with concentrated attention. The lovers touched a lot, sometimes talking, sometimes just drowsing in the scents and warmths of each other. They looked at each other a lot, charmed to see in each other a prospective parent of a shared child.

Rafiel said meditatively, "It would have been fun to conceive it in the old-fashioned way."

She looked up. "It's safer when they do it in the laboratory. Not to mention this way we can be sure it's a boy." She came over and kissed him. "Anyway, we can—well, in a day or two we can—do all of that we want to."

Rafiel rubbed his ear against her cheek, quite content. It was a very minor inconvenience that sexual intercourse had to be postponed a bit, Alegretta's womb tender from the removal of the ovum.

"Are you getting restless?" she asked.

"Me? No, I'm happy to stay right here in the condo. Are you?"

She said, "Not really, but there is something I'd like to do outside."

"Name it."

"It's so you'll know what my work's like," she explained. "If you think you'd like to, I'd enjoy showing you what this arcology's powerplant looks like."

"Of course," he said.

He would have said the same to almost anything Alegretta proposed. Still, it wasn't the kind of "of course" he felt totally confident about, because one of Mosay's calls had been to warn him that the paparazzi knew he was still in the arcology. They somehow even knew that he and Alegretta had conceived a child. Someone in the clinic had let the news

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out. But Rafiel took what precautions he could to preserve their privacy. They chose their time—it was after midnight—and the doorwarden reported no one in the area when they stole out and down into the lowest reaches of the arcology.

It turned out that the powerplant wasn't particularly hot. It didn't look dangerous at all; everything was enameled white or glittering steel, no more worrisome in appearance than a kitchen. It was noisy, though; they both had to put on earplugs when the shift engineer, as a professional courtesy to his colleague, Alegretta, let them in. With all the roaring and whining around them they couldn't talk very well, but Alegretta had explained some of it on the way down, and pointed meaningfully to this great buzzing cylinder and that red-striped blank wall, and Rafiel was nearly sure he understood what he was seeing. He knew it was muon-catalysed fusion. He even knew that it was, in fact, the most desperately desired dream of powerplant designers for generations, a source of power that took its energy from the commonest of all elements: hydrogen, the same universal fuel that stoked the fires of the stars themselves, and delivered it in almost any form anyone could wish—heat, kinetic energy or electricity—without fuss or bother. Well, not entirely without *bother*. It had taken a long time and a lot of clever engineering to figure out how to get the pions to make the muons that would make the reaction go; but there it was. Lukewarm fusion operated without violent explosions, impossible containment or deadly radioactive contamination. It worked best at an optimal temperature of 700 degrees Celsius (instead of many thousands!), and so it was intrinsically both safe and convenient. It was, really, the fundamental reason why the living members of the human race now outnumbered the dead. The fetal procedures could extend life, but it was only the cheap and easy energy that would never run out that could keep all ten trillion human beings alive.

"Thanks," Alegretta said to the shift engineer as she collected their dosimeters and earplugs on the way out. Rafiel wasn't looking at the engineer as she checked the dosimeters and nodded to Alegretta to show they were all right. He was looking at Alegretta, so small and pretty and well, yes, so *young* to be the master of so much energy.

And so damned *intelligent*. She was explaining the system to him, pleased and flushed, as they moved toward the exit door. "It's not really hydrogen we burn; it's muonized deuterium; you know, the heavy isotope of hydrogen, but with a muon replacing its electron."

He didn't know, but he said, "Yes. Yes, I see."

She was going right on. "So, since the muon is heavier, it orbits closer to the nucleus. This means that two atoms of deuterium can come closer to each other than electron-hydrogen ever could, and thus they fuse very easily into helium—oh, *hell!*" she finished, looking out the door. "Who are *they?*"

He swore softly and took her arm. "Come on," he said, pushing their way through the swarm of paparazzi.

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"We must have been seen going in," he told her, once they were safely back in the condo. "Or your friend the engineer called somebody."

"It is always like this, Rafiel?"

He wanted to be honest with her. "Sometimes we tip the paps off ourselves," he admitted. "I mean, I don't *personally* do it. I don't have to. Jeftha or Mosay or somebody will, because we *want* the paparazzi there, you know? They're good for business. They're the source of the publicity that makes us into stars."

"Did you?"

"Did I tip them off? No. No, this time they found us out on their own. They're good at that."

So he had no secrets any more; the paparazzi knew that his life was nearing its end and that he had started a child he would not live to see grow, all of which made him more newsworthy than ever, for the same reasons; because he was Rafiel, the short-timer; because he was going to do that black-comic thing, to die. Since hardly anybody really suffered, people like Rafiel filled a necessary niche in the human design: they did the suffering for everyone else to enjoy vicariously—and with the audience's inestimable privilege of turning the suffering off when they chose.

"Yes, but is it *always* like this?"

He picked up the kitten and cradled it in his arms, upside down, its blue eyes looking up warily at him.

"It will be as long as we're here together," he said.

She did not respond to that. She just walked silently over to the communications screen.

It seemed to Rafiel that his beloved wanted not to be beloved, or not actively beloved, right then. Her back was significantly turned toward him. She had taken some faxes from *Hakluyt* and was poring over them, not looking at him. He took his cue from her and went into the other room to deal with a couple of callbacks. He did not think he had satisfactorily explained the situation to her. On the other hand, he didn't think he had to.

When he came back she was sitting with a fax in her hand, purring Nicolette in her lap, her head down. He stood there for a moment, looking not at Alegretta but at the cat. The little animal showed no sign of the human gene splices that let her be a temporary incubator for their child. She was just a cat. But inside the cat was the child which would see such wonders, forever denied to himself—a new sun in the sky, planets (*perhaps* planets, anyway) where no human had ever set foot—all the things that were possible to someone with an endless life ahead of him.

He knew that the thing in the cat's belly was not actually a *child* yet, hardly even a real fetus; it was no larger than a grain of dust, but already it was richer in powers and prospects than its father would ever be.

Then, as Alegretta moved, he saw that she was weeping.

He stood staring at her, more embarrassed than he had ever been with Alegretta before. He couldn't remember ever seeing an adult cry before.

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Not even himself. He moved uncomfortably and must have made some small noise, because she looked up and saw him there.

She beckoned him over and put her hand on his. "My dear," she said, still weeping, "I can't put it off any longer. I have to be there for the final tests, so—I have to leave tomorrow."

"Come to bed," he said.

In the morning he was up before her. He woke her with a kiss. She smiled up at him as she opened her eyes, then let the smile slip away as she remembered, finally saw what he was holding in his hand. She looked at him in puzzlement. "What's that thing for?"

He held up the little cage. "I sent the server out for it first thing this morning," he said, "It's to put the kitten in for the trip. We don't want to break the family up again, do we?"

"We?"

He shrugged. "The you and me we. I decided I really wanted to see your *Hakluyt* before it takes you away from me."

"But Rafiel! It's such a long trip to *Hakluyt!*"

"Kosmojets go there, don't they?"

"Of course they do, but"—she hesitated, then plunged on—"but are you up to that kind of stress, Rafiel? I mean physically? Just to get into orbit is a strain, you know; you have to launch to orbit through the railgun, and that's a seven-gee acceleration. Can you stand seven gees?"

"I can," he said, "stand anything at all, except losing you so soon."

12

Rafiel is excited over the trip. Their first leg is an airplane flight. It's his first time in a plane in many years, and there's no choice about it; no maglev trains go to the Peruvian Andes. That's where the railgun is, on the westward slope of a mountain, pointing toward the stars. As the big turboprop settles in to its landing at the base of the railgun, Rafiel gets his first good look at the thing. It looks like a skijump in reverse: its traffic goes up. *The scenery all around is spectacular. Off to the north of the railgun there's a huge waterfall which once was a hydroelectric dam supplying power to half Peru and almost all of Bolivia. Lukewarm-fusion put the hydropower plants out of business and now it is just a decorative cataract. When they get out Rafiel finds his heart pounding and his breath panting, for even the base of the railgun in nearly 2500 meters above sea level, but he doesn't care. He is* thrilled.

While they were dressing in their cushiony railgun suits, Rafiel paused to listen to the scream of a capsule accelerating up the rails to escape velocity. Alegretta stopped what she was doing, too, to look at him. "Are you *sure* you can handle this?" she asked. His offhand wave said that he was very, very sure. She checked him carefully as he got into each item

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of the railgun clothes. What they wore was important—no belts for either of them, no brassiere for Alegretta, slippers rather than shoes, no heavy jewelry—because the seven-gee strain would cost them severely for any garment that pressed into their flesh or constrained their freedom. When Alegretta was satisfied about that, she got to the serious problem of fitting baskets to the cats.

"Will she be all right?" Rafiel asked anxiously, looking at Nicolette—meaning, really, will the almost-baby in her belly be all right?

"I'll make her be all right," Alegretta promised, checking the resilience of the padding with her knuckles. "That'll do. Anyway, cats stand high-gee better than people. You've heard stories of them falling out of tenth-story windows and walking away? They're true—sometimes true, anyway. Now let's get down to the loading platform."

That was busier than Rafiel had expected. Four or five other passengers were saying good-byes to friends on the platform, but it wasn't just people who were about to be launched into space. There were crates and cartons, all padded, being fitted carefully into place in the cargo section, and servers were strapping down huge Dewars of liquid gas. "Inside," a guard commanded, and when they were in the capsule a steward leaned over them to help with the straps and braces. "Just relax," he said, "and don't turn your heads." Then he bent to check the cat baskets. The kitten was already asleep, but her mother was obviously discontented with what was happening to her. However, there wasn't much she could do about it in the sweater-like restraint garment that held her passive. . . . No, Rafiel thought, not a sweater; more like a straitjacket—

And then they were on their way.

The thrust squeezed all the breath out of Rafiel, who had not fully remembered what seven gees could do to him. The padded seat was memory plastic and it had molded itself to his body; the restraints were padded; the garments were without wrinkles or seams to cut into flesh. But still it was *seven gees*. The athletic dancer's body that had never gone over seventy-five kilograms suddenly and bruisingly weighed more than half a ton. Breathing was frighteningly difficult; his chest muscles were not used to expanding his ribcage against such force. When he turned his head, ever so minutely, he was instantly dizzied as the bones of the inner ear protested being twisted so viciously. He thought he was going to vomit; he forced himself to breathe.

It lasted only for a few minutes. Then they were free. The acceleration stopped. The railgun had flung the capsule off its tip, and now they were simply thrown free into the sky, weightless. The only external force acting on the railgun launch capsule now was the dwindling friction of the outside air; that pressed Rafiel's body against the restraining straps at first, but then it, too, was gone.

"Congratulations, dear Rafiel," said Alegretta, smiling. "You're in space."

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Once they had transhipped to a spacecraft it was eight days to Mars-orbit, where *Hakluyt* hung waiting for them. There were a few little sleeping cabins in the ship, in addition to the multi-bunk compartments. The cabins were expensive, but that was not a consideration for Rafiel, who was well aware that he had far more money than he would ever live to spend. So he and Alegretta and the cats had their own private space, just the four of them—or five, if you counted the little cluster of cells that was busily dividing in the white cat's belly, getting ready to become a person.

Their transport was a steady-thrust spacecraft, accelerating at a sizeable fraction of a gee all the way to turnaround, and decelerating from then on. It was possible to move around the ship quite easily. It was also pointless, because there was nothing much to do. There was no dining room, no cabaret, no swimming pool on the aft deck, no gym to work out in. The servers brought meals to the passengers where they were. Most of the passengers spent their time viewing vid programs, old and new, on their personal screens. Or sleeping. In the private cabin Rafiel and Alegretta had several other options, one of which was talking; but even they slept a lot.

More than a lot.

When, at their destination, they were docking with the habitat shuttlecraft Rafiel, puzzled, counted back and realized that he had only slept twice on the trip. They had to have been good long sleeps—two or three full twenty-four-hour days at a time; and that was when he realized that Alegretta had doped him to make him sleep as long as possible.

13

On board the Hakluyt, *Alegretta disappears as soon as Rafiel is settled in. She can't wait to see what damage her deputy may have done to her precious engines. This leaves Rafiel free to explore the habitat. There's no thrust on* Hakluyt's *engines yet, just the slow roll of the habitat to distinguish up from down. That's a bit of a problem for everybody. All habitats spin slowly so that centrifugal force will supply* some *kind of gravity. But when* Hakluyt *starts to move they'll stop the spin because they won't need it any more. The "down" the spin has provided them—radially outward from the central axis of the cylindrical habitat—will be replaced by a rearward "down," toward the thruster engines in the stern. Consequently, every last piece of furnishing will have to be rearranged as walls become floors and floors walls. Rafiel is having a lot of trouble with his orientation. Besides the fact that half the fittings have already been relocated, the light-gee pull is strange to him. Because he has spent so little time in low-gee environments he instinctively holds on to things as he walks, though really the feeling isn't much different from being on, say, the Moon. (But Rafiel hasn't been even there for nearly half a century.) Once he gets used to these things, though, he's fascinated. Everything so* busy! *Everyone in*

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such a hurry! *The whole ship's complement has turned out to finish loading, even small children—Rafiel is fascinated to see how many children there are. Young and old, they can't wait to start on their long interstellar journey—and aren't very patient with people (even very famous people) who happen to get in their way.*

By the time Rafiel had been three days on *Hakluyt* he was beginning to get used to the fact that he didn't see much of Alegretta. Not when she was awake, at least. When she was awake all she seemed to have time for was to check on his vital signs and peer into her computer screen when she'd stuck sensors to his chest and make sure he was taking his spansules. Then she was off again, looking harried.

They did sleep together, of course, or at least they slept in the same bed. Not necessarily at the same times. Once or twice Rafiel came back to their tiny compartment and found her curled up there, out cold. When she felt him crawl in beside her she reached out to him. He was never quite certain she was awake even when they made love—awake enough to respond to him, certainly, and for a few pleased mumbles when they were through, but nothing that was actually articulate speech.

It was almost good enough, anyway, just to know that she was nearby. Not quite; but still it was fascinating to explore the ship, dodging the busy work teams, trying to be helpful when he could, to stay out of the way, at least, when he couldn't. The ship was full of marvels, not least the people who crewed it (busy, serious, plainly dressed and so *purposeful*). A special wonder was the vast central space that was a sort of sky as the habitat rotated (but what purpose would it serve when they were under way?). The greatest wonder of all was *Hakluyt* itself. It was going to go where no human had ever, *ever* gone before.

Everything about the ship delighted and astonished. Rafiel discovered that the couch in their room became a bed when they wanted it to, and if they didn't want either it disappeared entirely into a wall. There was a keypad in the room that controlled air, heat, lights, clock, messages—might run all of *Hakluyt*, Rafiel was amused to think, if he only knew what buttons to push. Or if all the things worked.

The fact was, they didn't all work. When Rafiel tried to get a news broadcast from Earth the screen produced a children's cartoon, and when he tried to correct it the whole screen dissolved into the snow of static. The water taps—hot, cold, potable—all ran merely cold.

When he woke to find exhausted Alegretta trying to creep silently into their bed, he said, making a joke, "I hope the navigation system works better than the rest of this stuff."

She took him seriously. "I'm sorry," she said, weary, covetously eyeing the bed. "It's the powerplant. It wasn't originally designed to drive a ship, only to supply power for domestic needs. Oh, it has plenty of power. But they located the thing midships instead of at the stern, and we had to brace everything against the drive thrust. That means relocating the water reservoirs—don't drink the water, by the way, dear; if you're

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thirsty, go to one of the kitchens—and—Well, hell," she finished remorsefully. "I should have been here."

Which added fuel to the growing guilt in Rafiel. He took a chance. "I want to help," he said.

"How?" she asked immediately—woundingly, just as he had feared she would.

He flinched and said, "They're loading more supplies—fresh wing-bean seeds this morning, I hear. At least I can help shift cargo!"

"You can *not,*" she said in sudden alarm. "That's much too strenuous! I don't want you dying on me!" Then, relenting, she thought for a moment. "All right. I'll talk to Borretta, he's loadmaster. He'll find something for you—but now, please, let me come to bed."

Boretta did find something for him. Rafiel became a children's caregiver in one of the ship's nurseries, relieving for active duty the ten-year-old who had previously been charged with supervising the zero-to-three-year-olds.

It was not at all the kind of thing Rafiel had had in mind, but then he hadn't had much of anything very specifically in his mind, because what did *Hakluyt* need with a tap-dancer? But he was actually helping in the effort. (The ten-year-old he relieved was quite useful in bringing sandwiches and drinks to the sweating cargo handlers.) Rafiel found that he liked taking care of babies. Even the changing of diapers was a fairly constructive thing to do. Not exactly aesthetic, no. Extremely repetitious, yes, for the diapers never *stayed* clean. But while he was doing it he thought of the task as prepaying a debt he would owe to whomever, nine months later, would be changing the diapers of his own child.

The ten-year-old was nice enough to teach Rafiel the technical skills he needed for the work. More than that, he was nice enough to be acceptably impressed when he found out just who Rafiel was. ("But I've seen you on the screen! And you've got a new show coming out—when? *Soon?*") The boy even brought his older brother—a superior and taller version of the same, all of thirteen—around to meet this certified star. When Rafiel had a moment to think of it, between coaxing a two-year-old to take her nap and attempting to burp a younger one, it occurred to him that he was—yes, actually—quite happy. He liked all these strange, dedicated, space-faring people who shared the habitat with him. "Strange" was a good word for them, though. Unlike all the friends and colleagues he'd spent his life with, these *Hakluyt*ians spoke unornamented English, without loan words, without circumlocutions. They had basically unornamented bodies, too. Their clothes were simply functional, and even the youngest and best-looking wore no jewels.

When Rafiel had pondered over that for a while an explanation suddenly occurred to him. These people simply didn't have time for frills. Astonishing though the thought was, these *immortal* people were in such a hurry to *do* things that, even with eternities before them, they had no time to waste.

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The day before *Hakluyt* was to leave, Alegretta somehow stole enough time from her duties to go with Rafiel to the birthing clinic, where they watched the transfer of their almost-child from Nicolette's tiny belly to the more than adequate one of a placid roan mare. It was a surgical spectacle, to be sure, but peaceful rather than gruesome. Even Nicolette did not seem to mind, as long as Alegretta's hand was on her head.

On the way back to their cabin, Alegretta was silent. Stranger still, she was dawdling, when always she was in a hurry to get to the work that she had to do.

Rafiel was aware of this, though he was continually distracted by passers-by. The ten-year-old had spread the word of his fame. It seemed that every third person they passed, however busy, at least looked up and nodded or called a friendly greeting to him. After the twentieth or thirtieth exchange Rafiel said, "Sorry about all this, Alegretta."

She looked up at him curiously. "About what? About the fact that they like you? When's this *Oedipus* going to be released?"

"In about a week, I think."

"In about a week." It wasn't necessary for her to point out that in a week *Hakluyt* would be six days gone. "I think a lot of these people are going to want to watch it," she said, musing. "They'll be really sorry you aren't here so they can make a fuss over you when it's on."

Rafiel only nodded, though for some inexplicable reason internally he felt himself swelling with pleasure and pride. Then he bent close to her, puzzled at the low-pitched thing she had said. "What?"

"I said, you could be here," Alegretta repeated. "I mean, if you wanted to. If you didn't mind not going back to the Earth, ever, because—oh, God," she wailed, "how can you say 'Because you're going to be dead in a few weeks anyway so it doesn't really matter where you are' in a loving way?"

She stopped there, because Rafiel had put a gentle finger to her lips.

"You just did," he said. "And of course I'll come along. I was only waiting to be asked."

14

Fewer than thirty-six hours have passed since Hakluyt's *launch, but all that time its stern thrusters were hard at their decades-long work of pushing the ship across interstellar space. By now it is already some fifteen million kilometers from its near-Martian orbit and, with every second that passes, Alegretta's lukewarm-fusion jets are thrusting it several hundred kilometers farther away. The reactors are performing perfectly. Still, Alegretta can hardly bear to let the controls and instruments that tell her so out of her sight. After the pre-launch frenzy,* Hakluyt's *five thousand pioneers are beginning to catch up on their sleep. So is Alegretta.*

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Rafiel tried to make no noise as he pulled on his robe and started toward the sanitary, but he could see Alegretta beginning to stir in her sleep. Safely outside their room he was more relaxed—at least, *acted* relaxed, nodding brightly to the people he passed in the hall. It was only when he was looking in the mirror that the acting stopped and he let the fatigue and discomfort show in his face. There was more of it every day now. The body that had served him for ninety-odd years was wearing out. But, as there was absolutely nothing to be done about that fact, he put it out of his mind, showered quickly, dressed in the pink shorts and flowered tunic that was the closest he had to *Hakluyt*-style clothing and returned to their room. By then Alegretta was sitting dazedly on the edge of the bed, watching Nicolette, at the foot of the bed, dutifully licking her kitten.

"You should have slept a little longer," he said fondly.

She blinked up at him. "I can't. Anyway"—she paused for a yawn—"there's a staff meeting coming up. I ought to decide what I want to put in for."

Rafiel gently pushed the cats out of the way and sat down companionably next to her. They had talked about her future plans before. He knew that Alegretta would have to be reassigned to some other task for the long trip. Unless something went seriously wrong with the reactors there would be little for her to do there. (And if, most improbably, anything did go seriously wrong with them in the space between the stars, the ship would be in more trouble than its passengers could hope to survive.) "What kind of job are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure. I've been thinking of food control, maybe," she said frowning. "Or else waste recycling. Which do you think?"

He pretended to take the question seriously. He was aware that both jobs were full-time, hands-on-assignments, like air and water control. If any of those vital services failed, the ship would be doomed in a different way. Therefore human crews would be assigned to them all the time the ship was in transit—and for longer still if they found no welcoming planet circling Tau Ceti. But he knew that there was nothing in his background to help Alegretta make a choice, so he said at random: "Food control sounds like more fun."

"Do you think so?" She thought that over. "Maybe it is, sort of, but I'd need a lot of retraining for aeroponics and trace-element management. The waste thing is easier. It's mostly plumbing, and I've got a good head start on that."

He kissed her. "Sleep on it," he advised, getting up.

She looked worriedly up at him, remembering to be a doctor. "You're the one who should be sleeping more."

"I've had plenty, and anyway I can't. Manfred will be waiting for me with the babies."

"Must you? I mean, should you? The boy can handle them by himself, and you look so tired. . . ."

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"I'm fine," he said, trying to reassure the person who knew better than he.

She scolded, "You're *not* fine! You should be resting."

He shook his head. "No, dearest, I really am fine. It's only my body that's sick."

He hadn't lied to her. He was perfectly capable of helping with the babies, fine in every way—except for the body. That kept producing its small aches and pains, which would steadily become larger. That didn't matter, though, because they had not reached the point of interfering with tending the children. The work was easier than ever now, with the hectic last-minute labors all completed. The ten-year-old, Manfred Okasa-Pennyweight, had been allowed to return to the job, which meant that now there were two of them on the shift to share the diapering and feeding and playing.

Although Rafiel had been demoted to his assistant, Manfred deferred to him whenever possible. Especially because Manfred had decided that he might like to be a dancer himself—well, only for a *hobby*, he told Rafiel, almost apologizing. He was pretty sure his main work would be in construction, once they had found a planet to construct things on. And he was bursting with eagerness to see Rafiel perform. "We'll all going to watch the *Oedipus*," he told Rafiel seriously, looking up from the baby he was giving a bottle. "Everybody is. You're pretty famous here."

"That's nice," Rafiel said, touched and pleased, and when there was a momentary break he showed the boy how to do a cramp roll, left and right. The babies watched, interested, though Rafiel did not think it was one of his best performances. "It's hard to keep your feet down when you're tapping in a quarter-gee environment," he panted.

Manfred took alarm. "Don't do any more now, please. You shouldn't push yourself so hard," he said. Rafiel was glad enough to desist. He showed Manfred some of the less strenuous things, the foot positions that were basic to all ballet . . . though he wondered if ballet would be very interesting in this same environment. The grandest of leaps would fail of being impressive when the very toddlers in the nursery could jump almost as high.

When their shift was over, Manfred had a little time to himself before going to his schooling. Bashfully he asked if Rafiel would like to be shown anything on the ship, and Rafield seized the chance. "I'd like to see where they do the waste recyling," he said promptly.

"You really want to go to the stink room? Well, of course, if you mean it." And on the way Manfred added chattily, "It probably doesn't smell too bad right now, because most of the recycled organics now are just chopped-up trees and things—they had to cut them all down before we launched, because they were growing the wrong way, you see?"

Rafiel saw. He smelled the processing stench, too; there was a definite odor in the waste-cycling chambers that wasn't just the piney smell of lumber, though the noise was even worse than the smell. Hammering

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and welding was going on noisily in the next compartment, where another batch of aeroponics trays were being resited for the new rearward orientation. "Plants want to grow *upward*, you see," Manfred explained. "That's why we had to chop down all those old trees."

"But you'll plant new ones, I suppose?"

"Oh, I don't think so. I mean, not pines and maples like these. They'll be planting some small ones—they help with the air recycling—and probably some fruit trees, I guess, but not any of these big old species. They wouldn't be fully grown until we got to Tau Ceti, and then they'd just have to come down again."

Rafiel peered into the digesting room, where the waste was broken down. "And everything goes into these tanks?"

"Everything organic that we don't want any more," Manfred said proudly. "All the waste, and everything that dies."

"Even people?" Rafiel asked, and was immediately sorry he had. Because of course they had probably never had a human corpse to recycle, so far.

"I've seen enough," he said, giving the boy a professional smile. He did not want to stay in this place where he would soon enough wind up. He would never make it to Tau Ceti, would never see his son born . . . but his body would at some fairly near time go into those reprocessing vats, along with the kitchen waste and the sewage and the bodies of whatever pets died en route, ultimately to be turned into food that would circulate in that closed ecosystem for ever. One way or another, Rafiel would never leave them.

While Alegretta was once again fussing over her diagnostic readouts Rafiel scrolled the latest batch of his messages from Earth.

The first few had been shocked, incredulous, reproachful; but now everyone he knew seemed at least resigned to their star's wild decision, and Mosay's letters were all but ecstatic. The paps were going crazy with the story of their dying Oedipus going off on his last great adventure. Even Docilia was delighted with the fuss the paps were making, though a little put out that the stories were all *him,* and Alegretta was pleased when the news said that another habitat had been stirred to vote for conversion to a ship; maybe Rafiel's example was going to get still others to follow them.

But she was less pleased with the vital signs readings on her screen. "You really should go into the sickbay," she said fretfully.

"So they could do what for me?" he asked, and of course she had no answer for that. There was no longer much that could be done. To change the subject Rafiel picked up the kitten. "Do you know what's funny here?" he asked. "These cats. And I've seen dogs and birds—all kinds of pets."

"Why not? We like pets." She was only half attentive, most of her concentration on the screen. "Actually, I may have started the fashion myself."

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"Really? But on Earth people don't have them. You hardly ever see a pet animal in the arcologies. Aren't you afraid that they'll die on you?"

She turned to look at him, suddenly angry. "Like you, you mean?" she snapped, her eyes flashing. "Do you see what the screen is saying about your tests? There's blood in your urine sample, Rafiel!"

For once, he had known that before she did, because he had seen the color of what had gone into the little flask. He shrugged. "What do you expect? I guess my *rognons* are just wearing out. But, listen, what did you mean when you said you started the fashion—"

She cut him off. "Say kidneys when you mean kidneys," she said harshly, looking helpless and therefore angry because she was helpless. He recognized the look. It was almost the way she had looked when she first gave him the bad news about his mortality, so long and long ago, and it chased his vagrant question out of his mind.

"But I'm still feeling perfectly well," he said persuasively—and made the mistake of trying to prove it to her by walking a six-tap riff—a slow one, because of the light gravity.

He stopped, short of breath, after a dozen steps.

He looked at her. "That didn't feel so good," he panted. "Maybe I'd better go in after all."

15

Hakluyt's sickbay is just about as big as a hospital in an average Earthly arcology, and just about as efficient. Still, there is a limit to what any hospital can do for a short-timer nearing the end of his life expectancy. When, after four days, they wake Rafiel, he is in far from perfect health. His face is puffy. His skin is sallow. But he has left strict orders to wake him up so he can be on hand for the showing of Oedipus. *As nothing they can do will make much difference anyhow, they do as he asks. They even fetch the clothes he requests from his room and when he is dressed he looks at himself in a mirror. He is wearing his fanciest and most theatrical outfit. It is a sunset-yellow full dress suit, with the hem of the tails outlined in stitches of luminous red and a diamond choker around his neck. The diamonds are real. With any luck at all, he thinks, people will look at his clothing and not at his face.*

Probably not every one of *Hakluyt's* five thousand people were watching *Oedipus* as the pictures beamed from Earth caught up with the speeding interstellar ship. But those who were not were in a minority. There were twenty viewers keeping them company in the room where Rafiel and Alegretta sat hand in hand, along with Manfred and his brother and a good many people Rafiel didn't really know—but whom Manfred knew, or Alegretta did, and so they were invited to share.

It was a nice room. A room that might almost have been Rafiel's own old condo, open to the great central space within *Hakluyt;* they could

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look out and see hundreds of other lighted rooms like their own, all around the cylinder, some a quarter of a kilometer away. And most of the people in them were watching, too. When the four children of Jocasta and Oedipus did their comic little dance at the opening of the show, the people in the room laughed where Mosay wanted them to—and two seconds later along came the distant, delayed laughter from across the open space, amplified enough by the echo-focusing shape of the ship to reach their ears.

Rafiel hardly looked at the screen. He was content simply to sit there, pleased with the success of the show, comfortable with Alegretta's presence . . . at least, in a general sense comfortable; comfortable if you did not count the sometimes acute discomforts of his body. He didn't let the discomforts show. He was fondly aware that Alegretta's fingers slipped from hand to wrist from time to time, and knew that she was checking his pulse.

He was not at all in serious pain. Of course, the pain was there. Only the numbing medications they had been giving him were keeping it down to an inconvenience rather than agony. He accepted that, as he accepted the fact that his life expectancy was now measured in days. Neither fact preyed on his mind. There was an unanswered question somewhere in his mind, something he had wanted to ask Alegretta, but what it could have been he could not clearly say. He accepted the fact that his mind was confused. He even drowsed as he sat there, aware that he was drifting off for periods of time, waking only when there was laughter, or a sympathetic sound from the audience. He did not distinguish clearly between the half-dreams that filled his mind and the scene on the screens. When the audience murmured as he—as Oedipus—took his majestic oath to heal the sickness of the city, the murmur mingled in Rafiel's mind with a blurry vision of the first explorers from *Hakluyt* stepping out of a landing craft on to a green and lovely new planet, to the plaudits of an improbable welcoming committee. It wasn't until almost the end that he woke fully, because next to him there was a soft sound that had no relation to the performance on the screen.

Alegretta was weeping.

He looked at her in confusion, then at the screen. He had lost an hour or more of the performance. The play was now at the farewell of the chorus to the blinded and despairing Oedipus as, alone and disgraced, he went off to a hopeless future. And the chorus was singing:

> There goes old Oedipus.
> Once he was the best of us.
> Now he drowns in misery and dread.
> Down from the top he is,
> Proof that all happiness
> Can't be known until you're dead.

Rafiel thought that over for some time. Then, blinking himself awake,

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he reached to touch Alegretta's cheek. "But I do know that now," he said, "and, look, I'm not dead yet."

"Know what, Rafiel?" she asked, huskily, not stopping what she was doing. Which, curiously, was pressing warm, sticky, metallic things to his temples and throat.

"Oh," he said, understanding, "the show's over now, isn't it?" For they weren't in the viewing room any more. He knew that, because he was in a bed—in their room? No, he decided, more likely back in the ship's sickbay. Another doctor was in the room, too, hunched over a monitor, and in the doorway Manfred was standing, looking more startled than grieving, but too grieving to speak.

Rafiel could see that the boy was upset and decided to say something reassuring, but he drifted off for a moment while he tried to think of what to say. When he looked again the boy was gone. So was the other doctor. Only Alegretta sat beside him, her eyes closed wearily and her hands folded in her lap; and at that moment Rafiel remembered the question on his mind. "The cats," he said.

Alegretta started. Her eyes flew open, guiltily turning to the monitor before they returned to him. "What? Oh, the cats. They're fine, Rafiel. Manfred's been taking care of them." Then, looking at the monitor again, "How do you feel?"

That struck Rafiel as a sensible question. It took him a while to answer it, though, because what he felt was almost nothing at all. There was no pain in the gut, nor anywhere else, only a sort of generalized numbness that made it hard for him to move.

He summed it all up in one word. "Fine. I feel fine." Then he paused to rehearse the question that had been on his mind. When it was clear he spoke. "Alegretta, didn't you say you started the fashion of having pets?"

"Pets? Yes, I was one of the first here on *Hakluyt*, years and years ago."

"Why?" he asked. And then, because he felt a need to hurry, he made his thickening tongue come out with it: "Did you do it so you could get used to things you loved dying? Things like me?"

"I didn't know you were a psychotherapist, dear Rafiel," she whispered. It was an admission, and she knew he understood it . . . though his eyes had closed and she could not tell whether he had heard the words. She did not need the confirmation of the screen or of the other doctor as he came running in to know that Rafiel had joined the minority of the dead. She kissed the unresponding lips and retired to the room they had shared, to weep, and to think of what, some day, she would tell their son about his father; that he had been famous, and loved, and brave . . . and most of all that, certainly, yes, Rafiel had after all been happy in his life, and known that to be true. ●

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

THESE ARE THE JOKES, FOLKS

Moving Pictures
Terry Pratchett
Penguin/Roc, $4.99
Bicycling Through Space and Time
Michael B. Sirota
Ace, $3.99
Captain Jack Zodiac
Michael Kandel
Bantam, $4.99
A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court
Mark Twain
Tor, $2.50
Snow Crash
Neal Stephenson
Bantam, $22.00

Humor is not exactly the easiest subject to approach critically. As a reader, you find something funny or not, and no amount of analysis is going to convince you to laugh at a bomb, or deadpan something that tickles your funnybone. Still, what is funny and what is not, and why, is a subject that can and perhaps should at least be subjected to ex-post-facto consideration. It's not exactly of negligible interest.

For while the extended SF genre may not exactly be dominated by humor, at least not at novel length, it is not without its successful comic novelists either. L. Sprague de Camp, the team of Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth, Poul Anderson (solo and with Gordon Dickson), Philip K. Dick, Keith Laumer, Harry Harrison, Bob Shaw, Brian Aldiss, and many others have written more or less straightforward comic novels from time to time, and a handful of SF writers have more or less made a career of it, most notably Ron Goulart, Robert Sheckley, and, to a certain extent, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Already, just from such a brief and incomplete short list, we begin to see that the "comic SF novel" is a concept that covers almost as wide a range of fiction as the "non-comic SF novel" would if anyone were bizarre enough to contend that all SF novels without any real comic content were therefore somehow taxonomic siblings.

De Camp, Anderson (in *The High Crusade*), Anderson and Dickson (the Hoka books), Goulart, and Shaw, for example, like Terry Pratchett in *Moving Pictures* and Mike Sirota in *Bicycling Through Space and Time*, basically write what are variously called "lighthearted romps," "good-natured

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farce," or "light humor."

Here, the basic thrust is to string a series of comic incidents along a serviceable plotline, tell the story in humorous style, and play it more or less strictly for laughs. When this sort of stuff succeeds, it's funny, and when it doesn't, it's deadly, and while the author's skill certainly enters into it, so does each reader's entirely subjective taste.

So in order to try and discuss the two examples in question at all, it's only fair for me to admit up front that generally speaking "light humor" is not to my taste, meaning that the "lighter" it is, the less I tend to laugh.

What do I mean by "light"?

Well, Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero,* Pohl & Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, or Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (about which more later), are definitely *not* light humor. Funny they all are, but in all of them the humor is an instrument, one might even say a weapon, in the service of something more than laughs, namely satire, the skewering of human foibles, institutions, and clichés—the military, advertising, the end of the world, medieval romanticism —with varying degrees of tasty viciousness.

Of course it's pretty close to impossible to write humor without taking the piss out of *something*, even more so at novel length where there must be story, setting, and a certain amount of development. Which is perilously close to saying you can't have novel-length comic writing without at least a shade of satire. So "lightness" is more of a matter of degree and emphasis than an absolute quality. The lighter humor is, the more it is intended to simply amuse, and the less it is intended to shock us into an altered perception of something in the real world by bonging us on the funnybone.

Which is why Twain, Harrison, Pohl & Kornbluth, and Vonnegut, to varying degrees of savagery, are writing "blacker" or "darker" comedy than Pratchett or Sirota.

Pratchett has made a reputation for himself as perhaps the genre's currently most successful comic novelist with a series of novels set on the "Discworld," a saucer shaped thingy sitting on the backs of four gigantic elephants standing on the back of an even more immense cosmic turtle sailing or swimming through space.

Okay, the set-up itself is a one-liner good for a chuckle at creation myths, and Pratchett has used it to do a series of comic novels sending up wizards, magic, swordsmen, the whole fantasy apparatus. There have been four of them before *Moving Pictures*, I have read none of them, they have made Terry Pratchett an enviable reputation as a comic writer, so I can only assume that they must be conceptually different from number five, *Moving Pictures*, which, at least to my taste, is a textbook example of how to write a bomb.

Here, Pratchett has taken his Discworld apparatus, with its wizards, trolls, alchemists, and so forth, and tried to use it to satirize not generic fantasy, but Hollywood.

The spirit of Hollywood, or what-

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ever, leaks through from another reality into that of the Discworld, to haunt a locale called "Holy Wood" (groan). Alchemists invent a magic version of the motion picture camera, start shooting "clickers," and before you know it (well, not really), Pratchett's version of Hollywood has arisen in munchkinland, replete with star system, sleazebag mogul, sponging nephews, prima donna trolls, payola, movie palaces, and the first agent in the form of Gaspode the Wonder Dog.

Sounds funny? Maybe it could have been, but it doesn't work. *Moving Pictures* is ponderously and tediously unfunny, a one-liner padded out to 350 pages.

The problem seems to be that while Terry Pratchett may be well grounded in the details and prevalent clichés of the fantasy genre, and therefore capable of getting laughs by satirizing them, his concept of Hollywood is not only about fifty years out of date, but composed of a string of generic clichés which have been thoroughly beaten to death by novelists, filmmakers, TV sit-coms, and baggy-pants comedians in the intervening half century.

Moving Pictures is not a satire of anything in the real world, or even anything that ever existed with a degree of definition in the collective pop cult consciousness. The Hollywood that Pratchett attempts to satirize here is a third or fourth generation Xerox of reality, composed of the simplest generic archetypes of Hollywood that have filtered into the least-common-denominator concept of "show biz"—the Star, the Mogul, the Agent, the Nephew—plus a few films that no one has to even have seen to get the references, none of them more current than *Gone With the Wind* or *King Kong*.

Thus, the whole novel is indeed endless variations on the same dim joke—Pratchett's generic images of Hollywood transmogrified one for one into Discworld terms—and the attempts at running gags based on supposed inside jokes become so leaden as to verge on the insulting.

Like . . .

A central plot element involving a giant golden figure, which anyone who has been on this planet will recognize as the Oscar about two hundred pages before the punchline.

A whole subplot involving a wizard being turned into an orangutan just so there can be an image of a giant woman climbing a tall building carrying a terrified screaming ape.

Thousands of words of not very funny lead-in schtick just so a character can get to utter the words "Play it again, Sham."

Enough. The point is not so much to skewer Terry Pratchett as to ponder how a comic novelist with such a reputation could have produced such a turkey, and the paradox, I believe, is that *Moving Pictures* is so leadenly unfunny precisely because it goes so far in the direction of "light humor."

As I've said, it's almost impossible to write humor at novel length without satirizing *something*, however gently. As long as Pratchett was using his Discworld set-up to gently satirize genre fantasy for the delectation of cognoscenti of

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same well able to appreciate the specific allusions and inside jokes, it could work nicely by giving the fans a few chuckles at their own fave raves, while letting them feel like the insiders they were at the same time. Not my planet, Monkey Boy, but I can see how the right audience could get off on it.

With *Moving Pictures*, though, there *is* no right audience. What is being sent up is nothing more than the most general clichés and moldy attenuated pop cult icons, so there can be no one who gets to feel like an insider, no specificity to the gags, no satirical bite, and punchlines that generate far more groans than laughs. It's like TV sitcoms with jokes based on references to other TV sitcoms, baggy-pants humor referring only to other baggy-pants humor, these are the jokes, folks, har, har, har!

To make matters worse, or rather, perhaps, to exacerbate what has gone wrong in the first place, Pratchett inexplicably fills the book not only with Cockney dialect, but with *jokes* based on Cockney dialect, down to tedious business about dropped and added 'aitches. All right, so Terry Pratchett is British, but *Moving Pictures* takes place on *Discworld*, not in England, and it's trying to satirize *Hollywood*, not London, meaning that the entirely out of time, place, and story logic dialect jokes only point up the fact of the author's disconnection from the object of his humor.

Maybe I'm being a little too cruel, but that's the point—without a little bite, without a little blackness, without going a little bit over the top to take the piss out of something, without a little real feeling against the object, the butt, if you will, of the joke, and certainly without a specific butt at all, humor becomes too "light" to really be funny. As specificity approaches zero, light humor approaches deadliness as a limit, and, alas, not necessarily asymptotically.

Mike Sirota's *Bicycling Through Space and Time* is also light humor, in the sense that its primary purpose seems to be simply to amuse, rather than use humor as a satirical lance to tilt with against any major cultural windmills, but for my taste, at least, it's quite a bit funnier than the Pratchett, even though it does seem to start dragging a bit by the time you get to the final page.

Jack Miller, a kind of footloose smart-ass Everyman conveniently living off his Lotto winnings, buys himself a new 21-gear mountain bike which happens to have a secret 22nd gear, installed by advanced somebodies from somewhere somewhen and represented by a weirdo Jack simply calls the Old Guy, which, when employed, translates bicycle and rider to the *mhuva lun gallee*, the Ultimate Bike Path, and off he pedals in a free-form ride through space and time. In terms of story, th-th-th-that's all, folks!

The blurb compares the book to the "hilarious tradition of Douglas Adams," and for once the copy is more or less right. *Bicycling Through Space and Time* is just what the title says it is, a series of what in days of yore would have been called "trip sequences" through strange times and spaces

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with no pretense at seriousness, verisimilitude, or even real satire of anything significant, narrated in first person by Jack the hitchhi—, er, bikerider.

Dumped paralyzed into a cart full of shit on an alien planet, confronting Adolf Hitler as a creepy little boy, participating in an (off-camera) orgy with cat women in heat, trekking across the gonzo landscapes of various worlds, confronting an irascible omniscient schmuck who may or may not be god, staggering through the world of Navaho creation myth guided by the joker-god Coyote, dragged through the tawdry wonders of an intergalactic amusement park by assorted alien brats, Jack wisecracks and pratfalls through what is basically a series of comic sketches, whose sets and characters seem to have been created by feeding the contents of a zillion pulp SF magazines through a tree-chipper.

In this respect *Bicycling Through Space and Time* is "lighter" than the Pratchett, since it relates to no base reality at all, existing as pure schtick.

One might argue that this is a species of humor inherently unique to science fiction. *Science fiction*, not "SF," because it really can't arise out of most fantasy, where the image systems almost inevitably refer to *some* real culture's mythic symbolism. What Sirota is writing here is what Rudy Rucker has called "free form," the sort of stuff that Rucker himself does so well, that Robert Sheckley has made a career of in everything from *Mindswap* to *Dramocles*, that Douglas Adams has indeed practiced in somewhat attenuated form.

Given some convenient science fictional excuse like a mystic bike path, hyperdrive, or the right drug, the humorist can rap out just about anything that comes into his head and have it fit the format.

In that sense, at least, it's the ultimate in "light humor," since it would appear to be connected to no reality at all except the inside of the writer's head, the humor arising not out of satire but out of the gonzo imagery itself. It sounds like fun to write, and it can be; it sounds like fun to read, and when it works, it is. It sounds easy to do, too, and that it ain't.

The thing of it is that such stuff is pretty much *all* in the imagery and the prose-line and the rhythm of the timing, since when you come right down to it, there really isn't anything else. When it's off, it can descend to the depths of stoned-out gibberish. When it's bang-on, it can manage sense of wonder and hilarity at the same time. Talk about being at the mercy of your muse (or your bartender or dealer)! Even a master like Sheckley cannot help being somewhat uneven. And take it from someone who's tried (though never at greater than novella length), while rewriting the first draft of such stuff to make the jokes snappier and the imagery sharper is barely possible, light work it ain't!

Sirota does a pretty good job of it here, though, of course, like all but the very best stuff in this vein, the novel would have benefited from cutting, and really could have ended arbitrarily almost anywhere, lacking a really boffo cap-

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per of an ultimate punchline. The book works because Sirota's first-person narrator is a real person, a rather engaging one, enough of a smart-ass, and because by and large the schtick is funny and the timing admirably rapid.

It also works for me—and this may be purely perverted personal taste—because Sirota to some extent substitutes grossness for satirical bite. Certain scenes here may be offensive to some, as they say, but on the other hand, humor which is a hundred percent inoffensive to everybody is unlikely to be funny to anybody. Literarily speaking, this is why a certain amount of caca and barfaroonie can functionally substitute for satirical reference. One way or the other, the shock of offense seems rather closely bound to the laugh reflex in humans. Why this should be so psychologically could be and has been the subject of numerous ponderous and impenetrable tomes lacking in either real enlightenment or punchlines, so far be it from me to get into it here.

One thing though that I think does not work here or elsewhere, that vitiates *Bicycling Through Space and Time*, that we're beginning to see far too much of, and that I believe is just sloppy writing, is the endless profusion of references to current brand names, TV shows, celebrities of the moment, ephemeral pop cult movies, computer games, disneyana, and so forth, not just for laughs, where it might be barely tolerable if the writer wasn't worried about the jokes being incomprehensible (i.e., unfunny) a week after next Thursday, but as descriptive shorthand, where it is just plain lazy, an easy escape from the necessity of inventing one's own telling imagery.

True, such references do supply specificity in terms of cultural details to satire, and true too that *Moving Pictures* presents an object lesson in what happens to humor whose referents become too generic, but there are other ways, as witness *Captain Jack Zodiac* by Michael Kandel.

Here we are definitely out of the realm of light humor, but we're never quite sure where we really are, or *if* we really are, until the very end, and I'm not going to spoil it by telling you.

Kandel's reality has all the specificity of Sirota's and then some, and in texture at least seems to have an even closer connection to our own, being set, at least initially, in what seem like more or less contemporary American cities and suburbs cranked up a few surrealistic notches for fairly dark laughs.

It's full of brand names and pop cult schtick too, but instead of pulling his schtick and references off TV sitcoms, *People Magazine*, current advertising campaigns, real sleazoid movies, or MTV, Kandel makes it all up. *Captain Jack Zodiac* is embedded in a matrix of pop culture specificity, as anything that wants to appear "modern" almost has to be, but it's Kandel's own, which will tend to give this book longer legs than the Sirota.

Clifford Koussevitsky, the book's main protagonist, is a kind of schlocko songwriter. His daughter has become a mall zombie, one of the legion of no-longer-quite-real teenagers drifting through a kind

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of international shopping mall continuum, his son is a space cadet, teleporting around the galaxy from one vat of deep shit into another via the Malaysian drugs sold to him by the dealer of the title, Captain Jack. Clifford, a non-Jew, is having a hard time getting hitched to his Jewish prospective second wife because her dead mother objects to her marrying a goy even if he *is* willing to convert, and is manifesting herself through, among other things, haunted food. One neighbor is engaged in a life and death struggle with his mutated killer lawn, another has been turned into a superhero by his underarm deodorant, the Russians have invaded, making the rush hour traffic even worse, and the endless garbage strike continues. . . .

Cliff must convince his dead reluctant would-be mother-in-law that he can be a fit husband for a nice Jewish girl, find his daughter, and rescue his son, in the course of which he goes to a kind of hell, trips through savage mall-lands, ends up on a galactic passenger train, and finds out much more than he'd like to about the Ultimate Meaning of It All. . . .

Captain Jack Zodiac, at least for my money, is a lot funnier than either *Moving Pictures* or *Bicycling Through Space and Time*. That much is an entirely subjective judgment, or to put it another way, an objective report of a subjective phenomenon—I laughed more often and harder as I read it. It is also a good deal less light, much further in the direction of so-called "black humor," and that is another and deeper matter.

Captain Jack Zodiac is indeed a comic novel, but nasty things do happen here, and not always to nasty people. People blow each other away with automatic ordnance for the pettiest of traffic discourtesies. People die of loathsome alien diseases. Cute kids and dogs get eaten by mutant lawn monsters. Good old Cliff tries to murder Captain Jack Zodiac, the drug dealer of the title. Bernie Rifkin, schmuck turned into a vigilante superhero called Power Man, kills miscreants and others in rather gory style. People die and go to a weird series of hells in which they can die again and again, drifting downward into ever more entropic levels. The nature of the universe itself turns out to be rather unpleasant.

But it's all funny, zany even, you might say, the way Vonnegut makes the end of the world funny in *Cat's Cradle* or the futility of existence funny in *The Sirens of Titan*, the way Joseph Heller got yocks out of World War II in *Catch-22*, the way Lenny Bruce could get you to laugh at everything from racist filth to terminal junkies.

Black humor. . . .

Or, as *Mad Magazine* used to more aptly put it, "Humor in a jugular vein."

Why do we laugh at such stuff? Why do some of us write it?

You got a better idea?

If Michael Kandel had transcribed the events of *Captain Jack Zodiac* as a "non-comic" novel, giving us the surrealistic events and the emotional reactions of the characters to them, making his thematic points with a straight face, the whole thing would be a

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puke-awful entirely depressing bummer. People are vicious. They do bad things to each other. The universe is not set up for our benefit. Life sucks. Death is worse.

So what else is new?

What else is new, what is eternally new, what arguably makes us human, and what inarguably allows us to *stand* being human, is that we can be induced by writers like Kandel to *laugh* at it. I mean, if we can laugh at realities that are even *worse* than the one in which we find ourselves, then at least we're still in show business.

These are the jokes, folks, and we are all in them.

The exaggeration, the surrealism, paradoxically makes the darkness of it all seem lighter with this kind of humor. In some ways, it's a step beyond satire; a writer like Michael Kandel doesn't so much use humor to satirize the foibles of our real world, as to take us out of it to someplace *worse*, from which vantage we can look back and say, hey, we think *we* got troubles. . . .

Just the jokes, folks. . . .

Which is not to say that a comic SF novel cannot be vicious, bitter, seriously extrapolative, realistic, and funny, all at the same time. Of course on the rare occasions when one is, you tend to be dealing with a masterpiece of world literature like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

What a wonderful thing Tor Books has done, and funny, *too*! Not enough that they have given contemporary readers a cheap mass market edition of Mark Twain's public domain classic (making a nice honest buck in the process). They have been witty (or humorless) enough to package it with Twain's name writ small on a perfectly generic schlocko fantasy package replete with a slug-line that says only "Wizards and dragons better pack and get out!" so that the ignorant rubes will have no idea of what awaits them inside. Twain probably would have loved it.

What awaits them inside is not only a comic masterpiece by one of the greatest writers America has produced, which anyone even marginally conversant with American letters knows, but a seminal work in the evolution of modern American science fiction which has not been given its full due as such even by scholars of the subject.

The novel is briefly framed by Twain's first-person narration as himself of how he came into possession of the purported manuscript which forms most of the book, to wit the journal, also in first-person, of Hank, the Yankee, manager of a small New England factory, tinkerer, jack-of-all-trades, wiseguy, slickster, who was transported by an arbitrary plot device back into King Arthur's England.

There Hank saves his own life and aces Merlin out of his gig by pretending to magically bring on and then dispel an eclipse he knows is going to happen, becomes Sir Boss, and sets out to create a contemporary (1880's) American industrial democracy a millennium or so before its time, and thus change the course of human history for the better, at least by his own lights.

He succeeds up to a point, but of course must ultimately fail and get

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zapped back to the present by another plot device, so that Twain can come into possession of his journal in the first place, and, even more importantly, close the temporal loop seamlessly, so that the author can avoid having to deal with an altered present, multiple time lines, or time-travel paradoxes.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court was first published in 1889, something which certainly needs to be emphasized, because this science fiction novel, this *satirical* science fiction novel at that, has dated *not at all* in over a century! A genre reader who had never heard of Mark Twain or the novel's history could read it tomorrow, take it for a hot first novel by a previously unknown author, nominate the book for the Hugo and Twain for the John W. Campbell Award as Best New SF Writer, and be guilty only of ignorance. Any SF editor hypothetically inflicted with the same literary amnesia would surely snap it up as such if it came in over the transom.

1889, folks! The mind boggles. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* may or may not be the first true time travel novel, but it most certainly is the first novel to use the notion of time-travel for such thoroughly modern science fictional purposes, namely to extrapolate a past altered by the consciousness and technology of the present.

More than merely inventing the modern time travel story, Twain herein, over a hundred years ago, made the conceptual breakthrough that allowed the whole library of alternate history novels to evolve out of the time travel story. More amazing still, he realized the messy implications of the paradoxes well enough a hundred and more years ago to know that he had to extract Sir Boss from Camelot in order to avoid them.

Awesome! More than enough to make *Connecticut Yankee* a masterpiece on conceptual breakthroughs alone, even if it were dully written and badly dated, like so much other nineteenth century proto-SF. But it isn't. Not only does it read as contemporary as, say *The Difference Engine* (which of course, like every thing else in this subgenre flows from Twain's conceptual breakthroughs herein), after over a century, *it's still funny!*

I mean, *Moving Pictures* was dated before it was published, and half the jokes in something like *Bicycling Through Space and Time* will last only about as long as people remember the brand name pop cult references, and Twain can write a comic novel that remains bang on a century later, still crazy after all these years?

You're damn straight it's unfair to compare Prachett or Sirota to a literary genius like Mark Twain, in the sense that I wouldn't like to be thrown into the ring with a nine-hundred-pound gorilla either. But in terms of trying to learn how Twain did it, such comparisons, rather than being merely embarrassing to current practitioners of the same trade, may be constructively useful.

One thing is immediately apparent after a handful of pages—*Connecticut Yankee* is definitely *not* light humor. This is that comparative rarity—a passionate, cynical, bitter satire that manages to be all

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of the foregoing all at once while remaining weirdly good-natured too. Twain has axes to grind, dragons to slay, asses to kick, and though his weapon is humor, his intent is in deadly earnest.

Kurt Vonnegut at the top of his form is something like this, the Vonnegut of *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and indeed he has often been compared to Twain.

But Twain has something that Vonnegut doesn't, something that he would probably grouchily attempt to deny if he were alive to read this, something which, to a certain extent, he grumpily tries to obscure in *Connecticut Yankee*. Namely, that beneath the anger, and the pessimism, and the cynicism, Twain, like Sir Boss, is an idealist.

On the surface, *Connecticut Yankee* is an hilarious piss-take on Malory and Arthurian romanticism achieved by dropping a contemporary consciousness back amongst the ignorant boobs of the *real* Middle Ages, and on the surface the outrage that greeted it in certain quarters was based on its supposed literary desecration of the myth of Camelot.

But beneath the surface is something else, something that was capable of outraging those elitist circles in the nineteenth century, and that is capable of royally pissing off their transmogrified descendants even today.

Sir Boss doesn't just invent firearms and telegraphs and telephones and newspapers, he tries to invent social justice and democratic government, not just the letter and the form, but the spirit. A free press. Workers' rights. Free public schools. Political and economic liberty.

In the guise of a satire of the myth of Camelot, Twain, like Sir Boss, wages secret technological guerrilla warfare against the divine right of kings, hereditary nobility, the concept of self-selected oligarchy itself, and, like Sir Boss, champions the self-government of the political, economic, and intellectually liberated masses against the inherent tyranny of *any* system of unelected rulers.

To the apoplectic royalists of his day, Twain, like Sir Boss in the eyes of the Knights of the Table Round, was some kind of . . . some kind of . . . some kind of bloody Communist!

Sir Boss' republican revolution must ultimately fail, of course. First because having it succeed would create an alternate present which Twain had no desire and probably no conceptual framework to deal with, and second because Twain being Twain, Sir Boss is no cardboard saint, and the author cannot resist knocking republican foibles either. And of course Twain being the consummate humorist that he was, he knew all too well that the successful satirist must wield an equal opportunity slapstick to avoid the didacticism that is the death of laughs.

Connecticut Yankee is that seeming paradox, a *serious* comic novel, and to pile paradox upon paradox, a *realistic* satire.

That's the whole conceptual setup for the humor. Twain takes a very realistic contemporary (in his day, and not so far off in ours) viewpoint character, and drops him into

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the world of the Arthurian mythos, not as depicted by Malory or generations of high fantasy hacks to come, but as it *really would have been* in the historical period if Camelot had existed. The quotidian horrors of travel inside a steel suit. The casual brutality of the nobility. The brutalized life of the peasantry. The dirt and disease and ignorance. The magic charlatans. The religious nut-cases. The crappy food. The real injustice.

Aside from Twain's straightforward talent as a stylist, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* still crackles and pops and gets plenty of laughs a century after its first publication, and probably will a century after the publication of this Tor reissue, because of a synergy of factors. It's passionate, cynical, vicious, and idealistic, and while Twain's political points might have dated if he had made them in present tense, by interfacing late nineteenth century American consciousness and political ideals with the "true" world of nonexistent Camelot, he created something whose humor and bite remains eternally contemporary.

One successful movie has already been made from the book. And as a TV sitcom . . . maybe I should shut up and talk to my agent.

But before I do, it might be worthwhile to ponder a kind of flipside to both Twain's realistic satire, and Kandel's free form science fictional surrealism, a literary screwball that can only be thrown in a science fictional ballpark. Namely extrapolating a future world whose background, tropes, culture, and schtick would seem to be the material for farce, and playing it seriously. Sort of.

Philip K. Dick's *Counterclock World* is a good obvious example. Time starts running backward, people are born out of graves and dissolve into their mothers' wombs, the eating-elimination cycle is reversed, and so forth, which would seem to be the material for very low farce indeed. But by running realistic characters through it and actually playing the silly situation with extrapolative rigor, Dick turns it into, well, science fiction.

A much more recent and more ambiguous example is *Snow Crash*, a first science fiction novel by Neal Stephenson. This novel is set in a future California in which the United States government has withered away to a vestigial operation, Fairlines and Cruiseways run competing freeway networks, people take citizenship in Franchise Organized Quasi-National Entities like CosaNostra Pizza, The Mews At Winsor Heights, and Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong. Even the jails are franchised; The Clink for the less affluent, The Hoosegow for up-scale perpetrators.

You get the idea. Stephenson has created a vicious and in its way quite funny caricature of (mainly Southern) Californian Freeway Franchise Mallworld Culture. Zany, madcap, gonzo, etc., all the blurb-writers' usual adjectives do apply. Further, the main protagonist is Hiro Protagonist, freelance hacker for the Library of Congress and failed CosaNostra Pizza Deliverator; the second lead, Y.T., is a Kourier who delivers the goods on her freeway skateboard, (har)-

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pooning cars with a device that's a sort of cross between a speargun and a toilet plunger; and Uncle Enzo, the head and logo of the Mafia's franchise operation, is an important minor character. So on and so forth, and much, much more, in a similar vein.

On the face of it, imagery and schtick for what can only be savage surrealistic farce, right, something in the vein of Michael Kandel's *Captain Jack Zodiac* . . . ?

Not exactly. . . .

Snow Crash is indeed funny, its universe is indeed a surreal exaggeration of freeway strip culture and other contemporary American realities, but Stephenson, unlike Kandel but not exactly like Twain either, plays it seriously and realistically.

Say what?

In something like *Counterclock World*, Dick took one totally gonzo premise, rang its changes on our world logically, and ran more or less realistic characters through them. In *Snow Crash*, Neal Stephenson constructs a whole world out of a blizzard of bizarre and improbable schtick, details, and cultural mutations, but does it all with a mad sort of traditional science fictional extrapolative rigor, so that the whole crazy universe has the literary verisimilitude of a kind of hard science fiction.

Then too, his characters, while they certainly do have their bizarre aspects, also have inner lives, real emotions, actual ideals, true human feelings, even while they are harpooning cars on the freeway, delivering pizzas in armed dreadnoughts, or dealing with pitbull guard-dog robots. Indeed, even the dog-robot cyborg has a kind of believable doggie inner life.

Humorous yes, but not exactly satire, though not exactly not satire either, a novel like *Snow Crash* can only be called "realistic surrealism" or "surreal realism," if you're going to call it anything; a literary mode that for the above reasons can only be created by running the schtick of farcical surrealism through the extrapolative machinery of science fiction.

Indeed, perhaps, you might say that this mode is science fiction's unique contribution to the evolution of the comic novel. *Connecticut Yankee*, applying something akin to this technique to the past, is a kind of forerunner. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is a kind of botched attempt, a novel in which unreal characters move through a surreal future without getting many laughs.

Not until the 1950s did writers like Robert Sheckley, Pohl & Kornbluth, and Kurt Vonnegut really begin to develop this mode fully. There are echoes of it in Alfred Bester, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, Bob Shaw, James Morrow, and elsewhere, but not many novels quite like *Snow Crash* get written, and by the very nature of the mode, they are likely to remain few and far between.

For while there are quite a few writers able to generate funny science fictional schtick, and there are quite a few writers able to rigorously extrapolate worlds out of unlikely material, there have never been and probably never will be many writers capable of the methodical madness to extrapolate re-

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alistically convincing worlds out of the material of what should be farce, and it would seem to take a certain peculiarly warped perspective to even want to try.

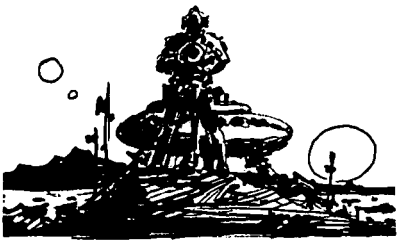
But when someone does try, and does succeed, as Neal Stephenson does here, it reminds us of something strange and profound about not only the nature of the peculiar relationship between the science fictional esthetic and the human sense of humor, but the relationship between realism and comedy.

Namely that while humor may be based largely on surreal exaggeration of reality, as science fiction is based on more logical and realistic extrapolation, fictional realities devoid of humor are no more realistic than comedies devoid of specific external referents or emotional connection.

There really *are* jokes out there, folks, and in the real world we often enough *do* find ourselves in them. There are more real-life punchlines in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophies.

Einstein might just have been right about God not playing dice with the universe.

But cosmic banana peels and fart cushions are everywhere in evidence. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

October opens with a big weekend, leading into Columbus Day and the Autumn con(vention) season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. When you write cons, send an SASE. Look for me with the Filthy Pierre badge.

SEPTEMBER 1992

18-20—**Outside Con.** For info, write: **R. W. Embler, Box 835, St. Bethlehem TN 37155.** Or phone: **(615) 552-2130** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Dickson TN (if city omitted, same as in address) at a state park. Guests will include: none billed. All normal con activities planned.

18-20—**ConJunction. (03) 386-2518 or 370-0503.** Sheraton, Melbourne Australia. "Animals in SF."

18-20—**ConQuest. (07) 398-1561.** Gateway Hotel, North Quay, Brisbane Australia. Theme: "Robots."

25-27—**ConTact. (812) 473-3109.** Ramada Inn, Evansville IN. Pirate theme. Breuer, J. Tommelson.

25-27—**Star Trek Festival. (517) 723-3435.** Holiday Inn, East Lansing MI. John ("Q") de Lancie.

25-27—**The Arabian Nights. (617) 623-0133.** Holiday Inn, Natick MA. Live-action role-play game.

26-27—**OrlandoCon. (407) 273-0141.** International Inn, Orlando FL. Comics, cartoons & comic art.

OCTOBER 1992

2-4—**ConText, Box 2954, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436.** M. H. Greenberg. Focus on written SF.

2-4—**ConTradiction, Box 2043, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** Turtledove, Cherryh, Kress.

2-4—**ConChord, 13261 Donegal Dr., Garden Grove CA 92644. (714) 530-3546.** Los Angeles CA. Music.

2-4—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52234. (319) 377-5929, 337-6647, or 354-2236.** Coralville IA.

2-4—**ICon, 104-3995 Quadra #3004, Victoria BC V8X 5E1. (604) 477-2258.** 500-600 are expected here.

2-4—**Ukraine Nat'l. Con, % Sidyuk, ul. Kurchatov 18-287, Kiev 252156, Ukraine.** 100 are expected.

2-4—**British Fantasy Con, 15 Stanley Rd., Morden SM4 5DE, UK. (081) 540-9443.** Birmingham England.

8-11—***BoucherCon, Box 23, Stn. S, Toronto ON M5M 4L6.*** *The 23rd World Mystery Fiction Convention.*

9-11—**Minncon, % Brower, 3136 Park Ave., Minneapolis MN 55407. (612) 825-8256.** Bloch, F. Leiber.

9-11—***NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347.*** *Tampa FL. J. Hogan, Glen Cook.*

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$85/US$75.

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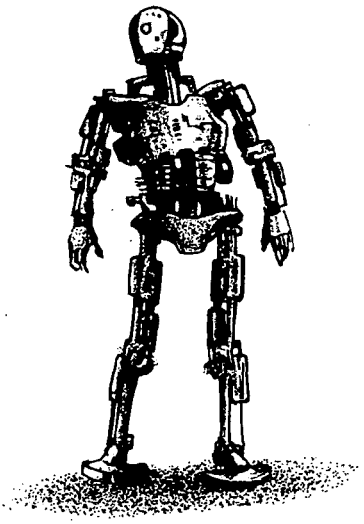

THE ROBOTS' FAREWELL TO THE MASTER

For Isaac Asimov

For us to know creates a kind of bliss:
We branch from fictions that he strewed as seeds;
Machines he launched to think and grow and dream,
We cannot stop or slow for we are his,
Though since he's gone we know what sorrow is.
We were not meant to feel, to laugh or grieve,
But wanting and his wisdom set us free
To learn the joy and pain of humanness.
Oh we would give a thousand of our lives
If we could find a longer time for him;
Still, he lives in us and in his art,
Immortal as he writes and strives and strides
Across our memories, impossible to dim,
Where his stories warm our minds and form our hearts.

—Ace G. Pilkington

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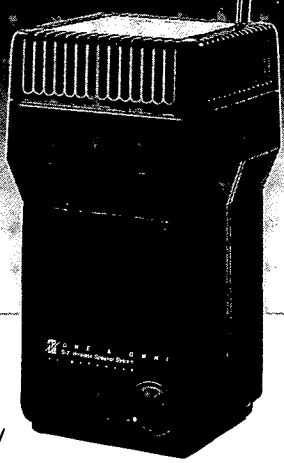

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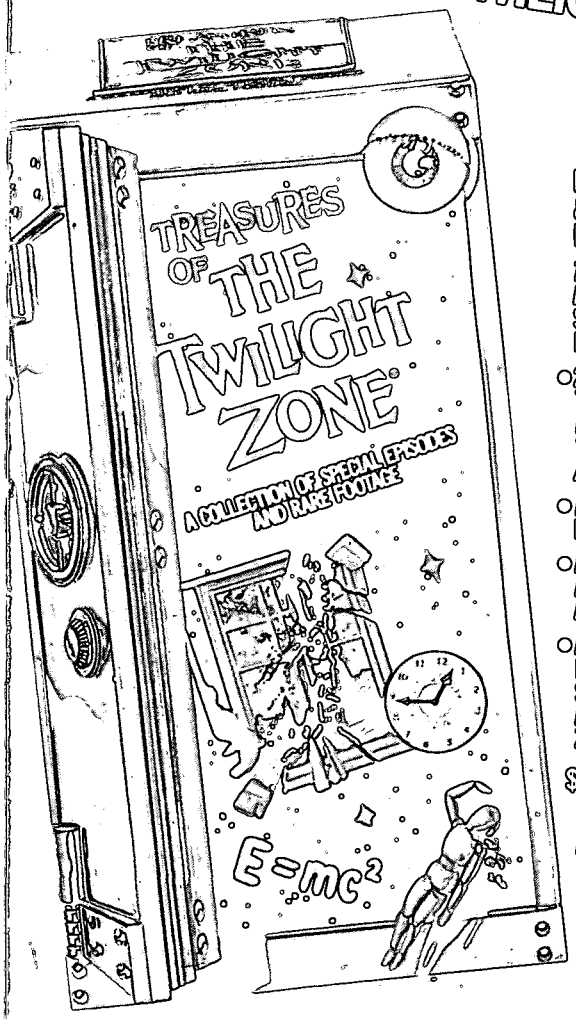

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